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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY:  
MEANINGS OF HAVING ONE'S STORY TOLD BY THE  
AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA

By

ANNE R. MORRIS

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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2000

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by

Anne R. Morris

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School  
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY:  
MEANINGS OF HAVING ONE'S STORY TOLD BY THE  
AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA

By

Anne R. Morris

December 2000

Chair: Dr. Linda C. Hon  
Major Department: Mass Communication

Numerous polls and studies indicate Americans view the news media industry as being insensitive and intrusive when it comes to covering news stories with a high element of human interest. Through qualitative research methods, the purpose of this study was to examine this aspect of news coverage from the point of view of exemplars (eyewitnesses, participants, or significant others sought out by the media for first-person interviews) to see whether prevailing attitudes accurately reflect the experience of those involved. Based on long interviews with 23 informants, results of this study suggest exemplars retain significant power and control in the initial periods following major news events in contrast to commonly held assumptions. Exemplification may be more accurately described as a collaborative and cooperative process, rather than exploitive. The meanings exemplars attributed to their experiences suggest useful guidelines for journalists and journalism educators, public relations and public affairs professionals, and

others such as crisis counselors and emergency response personnel who might interact with people involved in a newsworthy event.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In journalism, one person's pain is another's profession.

Raymond Schroth (1995, paragraph 5)

### Setting the Stage

It was late, and he seemed lost. Something terrible had happened. They told him to come to John F. Kennedy International Airport right away. Maybe they told him where he was supposed to go. But it was late. He got confused. And so the middle-aged man, his two friends at his side, accidentally waded into a sea of journalists and police officers milling in the moonlight outside the Delta Airlines Terminal. He was surrounded by people talking, and laughing, swilling coffee from paper cups. Some adjusted intricate pieces of electronic equipment. At first, no one noticed him. They were all too busy or bored. Then someone realized he wasn't a reporter. He wasn't a cop. He was just a guy who a few hours earlier put his wife and two daughters on Swissair Flight 111 to Geneva. Suddenly, the man, his face a mask of stone, was surrounded by more than two dozen reporters, all demanding to know who he was, how he felt, what he knew. (McGraw, 1998, paragraphs 1-8)

In the time it takes for an airliner to disappear from a radar screen or a bomb to explode, the taken-for-granted everyday life of survivors, friends, and family members may be changed forever. As unwelcome facts begin emerging from the darkest of fears, survivors and loved ones struggle to cope with the demands of tragedy. Often, one of these demands is the presence of the news media.

Less than 12 hours (after I reported the rape), my doorbell was ringing and the media were there. It wasn't one member, and it wasn't 20 members. There were somewhere near 100 members of the media outside my home within 24 hours of the crime. There were satellite trucks—you name it, they were there. Here is this confused, traumatized mind and body trying to grasp what the heck these people are doing here. (Bowman, 1994, p. 218)

Recent high-profile news events, such as the death of Princess Diana in 1997 and the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, have brought to the forefront the ongoing debate over what constitutes appropriate media coverage of private lives and public tragedy. The debate is not a new one. As far back as 1890, Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren complained, “The press is overstepping in every direction the obvious bounds of propriety and decency” (Reporter’s Committee for Freedom of the Press, 1998, paragraph 2). As a result of their indignation, Brandeis and Warren conceptualized a new right for Americans, the right to be left alone (Middleton, Chamberlin, & Bunker, 1997).

The debate has taken on new urgency in the information age, however. Real-time communications, and cellular phone technology, for example, enable media to be on-scene almost as quickly as—and sometimes even before—emergency personnel. Satellite technology has made live coverage of breaking news the norm and given audiences unforgettable images such as Grace Corrigan watching the space shuttle Challenger explode with her daughter Christa McAuliffe on board. Cable News Network and other all-news networks have revolutionized the amount of broadcast news coverage available to audiences and, in turn, have created an almost insatiable need for more audio, more video, more story angles, and more interviews.

“In recent years the ‘information age’ has burst into the information explosion,” wrote Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg and co-author Ellen Alderman in their book on privacy (1995, p. 151).

Radio and television have become ubiquitous, often running twenty-four hours. . . . All of these outlets need to be filled with information. As a consequence, people who in another time would have lived their lives in quiet obscurity now find themselves in the spotlight. (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995, p. 152)

Alderman and Schlossberg go on to liken the media at its worst to a predatory and dangerous animal roaming in a cherished private sphere (1995).

The debate continues between the news media industry and the American public. With a few notable exceptions, however, survivors and family members who have experienced a profound event and been a part of the ensuing news media coverage have not been a part of this dialogue. This study has been an attempt to give voice to people who have “been there,” and to explore the meanings they attach to these significant life events.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of the exemplification process for people who are pursued as exemplars in the telling of a news story. Aust and Zillman (1996) use the term “exemplar” to describe a victim or eyewitness who provides a reaction or testimonial regarding a newsworthy event. They write that an exemplar can convey the human drama and relevant issues of an event or issue more effectively than reporters’ verbal descriptions (p. 788). Aust and Zillman also write that these accounts are an integral part of news packaging and typically emphasize close-up camera techniques to best capture powerful emotional reactions.

Aust and Zillman (1996) use the term “exemplification” in the context of bringing relevance to issues through the use of persuasive and emotion-laden interviews with victims or eyewitnesses. In this study, however, exemplification is defined as the process exemplars experience when approached and interviewed by the media. Exemplification includes the publication or broadcast of exemplars’ stories, outcomes for exemplars, and the meanings exemplars assign to their experience.

Numerous polls and studies indicate that Americans view the news media industry as insensitive and intrusive when it comes to covering news stories with a high element of human interest. Through qualitative research methods, the purpose of this study was to examine this aspect of news coverage from the point of view of exemplars to see whether prevailing attitudes accurately reflect the experience of those involved. The meanings exemplars attribute to these



experiences may suggest useful guidelines for journalists and journalism educators, public relations and public affairs professionals, and others such as crisis counselors and emergency response personnel who might interact with people involved in a newsworthy event.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the world of TV news, viewers only see the product of journalism, never its process. They are not told that television is a lens that both reflects and shapes. We never see the consequences of our presence at a large-scale tragedy, and even more rarely do we think about them.

Ginger Casey (1999, paragraph 55)<sup>1</sup>

The late 1990s saw two trends—possibly related—develop in the news media industry. News content has shifted from traditional “hard news” topics such as foreign affairs and social issues to more human interest oriented coverage. At the same time, the American public has grown increasingly disillusioned with sensationalized coverage and what are perceived to be insensitive and intrusive newsgathering techniques.

#### News Media Environment

The self-reports of news organizations and content analyses of television news broadcasts, news magazines, and major national newspapers show an increasing emphasis in news coverage on people and human interest stories and a decline in traditional news reporting on government and social policy (Committee of Concerned Journalists [CCJ], 1997). In the results of a study on the changing definition of news, the CCJ reported there has been a “shift toward featurized and people-oriented approach to the news, away from traditional straight news accounts. This tends to make the news more thematic and make the journalist more a story teller and mediator than a reporter”

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<sup>1</sup> This and other sections from Casey’s “Beyond Total Immersion: Columbine High School shootings,” excerpted with permission of the publisher.

(CCJ, 1997, paragraph 5). A 1998 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* reported on a survey by the Project for Excellence in Journalism that found among other things that human interest stories increased from 15 to 43 percent on television newscasts and in the front pages of newspapers and news magazines (Hickey, 1998). Hickey explains how this trend continues with the increase in “soft” television news magazines (e.g., *Dateline* and *PrimeTime Live*), which deliver audiences to networks but are far cheaper to produce than standard entertainment fare. Human interest news and pseudo-news are not only cost effective in terms of production but also in terms of the audiences this coverage delivers (Hickey, 1998).

Dan Rather, network anchor and managing editor of the CBS Evening News, acknowledges that ratings and competition among media outlets influence which stories are covered and how. In explaining what he calls the “Hollywoodization of the news,” he said:

Fear runs strong in every newsroom in the country right now, a lot of different fears, but one fear is common, and that is the fear that if we don’t do it, somebody else will, and when they do it, they will get a few more readers, a few more listeners, and a few more viewers than we do. (Brill, 1998, paragraph 77)

This fear that Rather speaks of goes beyond the newsroom and out to reporters in the field. Reporter Ginger Casey recounted the effect of competition on journalists at the scene of a schoolyard shooting in Stockton, California, in 1989.

The next day, hundreds of journalists camped in front of the school, waiting to see if any children showed up. I was tapped on the shoulder. It was a woman I had worked with at a station in Los Angeles. She had been assigned to cover the story. “Christ, do you believe it?” she asked, looking over the crowd. “What a zoo. It makes me sick.” We talked for a few moments when she suddenly said, “Oh God, Ginger, I just hope no one gets a kid. I’m a mother. I can’t stand it.” Well then, I told her, don’t get one. “You know how it is,” she said. “If someone gets a kid, then I have to.” She was right, of course. If someone gets a kid, she would have to as well. It’s the way the game works: You don’t want your

competition to have anything you don't, and crying kids on camera are powerful images. (Casey, 1999, paragraphs 25-30)

Economics and competition more and more appear to shape the current news media environment. These forces affect content and, perhaps more often than appropriate, drive newsgathering techniques and boundaries.

### Public Dissatisfaction with News Media

While news coverage has moved from "hard" to "soft," various polls report an increasing perception on the part of the public that the news media are insensitive and intrusive. Much of this criticism was fueled by the August 1997 death of Princess Diana. Even before that, however, studies suggest the public was highly critical. The Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) cited a January 1997 Roper Center poll in which "82 percent of Americans think reporters are insensitive to people's pain when covering disasters and accidents" (Radio-Television News Directors Association [RTNDA], 1998, paragraph 2). Jacqueline Sharkey, in the *American Journalism Review* (1997), cited a 1996 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs that reported 80 percent of those surveyed felt the press ignored people's privacy. In a Pew Research Center study titled "Press Unfair, Inaccurate and Pushy" (1997), more than 60 percent of respondents felt television programs and newspapers unnecessarily invaded people's privacy beyond what was reasonable to cover what was in the public interest. Sharkey describes this as a paradox in the relationship between the press and the public: "People respond to certain types of coverage, then criticize the press for providing it" (1997, paragraph 50). In a *Newsweek* article, a Fox News vice president described the same paradox. "They reward us by watching, then complain about what they see" (Turner, 1999, p. 45).

While the news industry's bottom line may not have suffered yet, Douglas Clifton, editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, is concerned about another equally detrimental effect of the public's discontent.

I know that excesses have prevailed in the play of these kinds of stories and the public perception of our pursuit of them is that we are bloodthirsty, feelingless people who are only trying to sell newspapers. And I know that that contributes to . . . our diminished credibility." (Brill, 1999, paragraph 63)<sup>2</sup>

### Ethical Considerations

The issue is not a new one—and in fact, is reflected in codes of ethics subscribed to by news media representatives. The code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) goes into relative depth under the subheading of "Minimize harm."

Ethical journalists treat sources, subjects and colleagues as human beings deserving of respect. Journalists should:

    Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.

    Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.

    Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.

    Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials. . . . Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.

    Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity. (Society of Professional Journalists [SPJ], 1998)

Louis Hodges, a journalism ethicist, says that as the press' capability for invading privacy has increased, so, too, has its willingness to do so (Hodges, 1994). "When we see reporters poking microphones into the face of the mother who has just witnessed a fire that killed her three children, most of us are morally outraged" (p. 197). After tracing the social and legal history of the concept of privacy, he suggests a formal

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<sup>2</sup>This and other sections from "Privacy Vs. Curiosity," excerpted with permission of the publisher.

criterion for journalists to apply when considering whether to intrude on an individual's privacy. Hodges writes that reporters should do so only if "information about the individual is of overriding public importance and the public need cannot be met by other means" (p. 203). He continues,

The mere fact that people want to know is not enough to warrant the harm done to an individual by an invasion of his or her circles of intimacy. Any significant harm to the individual outweighs the public benefit in every imaginable case. (p. 204)

Steven Brill, founder of a media watchdog publication, addressed this subject in an in-depth feature in *Brill's Content* entitled "Curiosity Vs. Privacy" after the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr. (Brill, 1999). Brill argued that such news media industry balancing tests did not deter even mainstream media outlets from printing and broadcasting intrusive still and video photography of Caroline Kennedy and her family as they struggled with their grief after John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s aircraft accident. Brill was harsh in his criticism:

Sure, we were all curious to see the grieving family. But by any news standard other than curiosity was it necessary? Was there any way that showing these photos could survive the balancing test that news organizations claim they always engage in? That test is supposed to weigh the importance of covering something against the privacy that coverage invades. If this claim for privacy didn't tip the scales against the public's "need" to see some invasive photos of people, including children, in their hours of maximum grief, what could? (Brill, 1999, paragraph 9)

Using that coverage of the Kennedy Schlossberg family as a springboard, Brill polled more than 130 print and broadcast reporters and news executives about their willingness to adhere voluntarily to two restrictions he proposed (Brill, 1999). The first restriction was to refrain from publishing or broadcasting any images of children 14 and younger without consent of the young subject and a parent or guardian, excepting cases where children were voluntary public figures (e.g., entertainers or participating in a

parent's political campaign). The second restriction was not to use or actively seek\* images of grieving families within one week of the death of their loved one(s).

Brill's proposal and poll generated a great amount of debate, but little change. Eighteen respondents said they would be willing to adopt the voluntary guidelines, but most news industry members either failed to respond or wrote back that guidelines would not work and could not account for the great variety of situations to which they might apply. The editor in chief and editorial director for Time, Inc., responded:

We believe that in the long run the privacy of those who are entitled to it is best protected by editors who understand the fine line between individual rights and the public's right to know, between fairness and decency on the one hand and the commercial impulse on the other. That's why we continue to place so much emphasis on judgment, character, and common sense when we appoint editors—and then trust them to make the hard calls that cannot easily be addressed in a few guidelines. To sum up, voluntary restrictions are too simple a solution to a complex issue. (Brill, 1999, paragraph 47)

The Columbine shooting was yet another recent example of the tough calls required of news directors and editors. In the aftermath, the Radio-Television News Directors Association issued a new set of guidelines in an effort to share some of the lessons learned in Littleton, Colorado (Ostrow, 2000a). One guideline reiterated the need for handling exemplars with sensitivity: "Exercise care when interviewing family members or friends of those involved in standoff situations. Make sure the interview legitimately advances the story for the public and is not simply conducted for the shock value of the emotions conveyed" (Ostrow, 2000a, p. 6K).

The privacy vs. the public's right-to-know issue also has been discussed in media ethics treatises and pedagogic forums. The *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* has devoted entire issues to the topic of journalism and privacy. Michigan State University's School of Journalism established the "Victims and the Media Program" in 1991 "in response to

\*rowing concerns about the media's handling of victims" (Michigan State University [MSU] School of Journalism, 1999, paragraph 1). In addition to focusing on media treatment and portrayals of victims, MSU also seeks to educate journalists about more humane techniques of approaching and interviewing victims. Some of MSU's tips to journalists include granting victims a sense of power and control and being prepared to be the first to deliver bad news that a loved one has been killed or maimed (MSU, 1999). (In perhaps tacit recognition of the competitive aspect of journalism, the latter tip does not even discuss the possibility that a journalist wait to contact a family until after the family has received some form of official notification regarding the tragic news event!)

One such incident was recounted by Marilyn Saltzman, spokeswoman for the Jefferson County school district, as occurring during the Columbine school shooting. "We did have the wife of the teacher who had been killed who learned her husband [Dave Sanders] had been shot from a newspaper reporter who called and said, 'Have you heard your husband has been shot?'" (Lipsher, 1999, p. 3B).

The perception of reporters as unscrupulous vultures (Turner, 1999, p. 45) who will go to any length to get a story does have basis in fact, and accounts of journalistic abuses are not uncommon. One reporter pretended to be a family member of a TWA Flight 800 victim in order to gain access to legitimate family members sequestered in a nearby airport hotel (Freedom Speaks, 1998). The reporter was arrested. After the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, one reporter donned rescue worker attire to be able to enter the ruins (Freedom Speaks, 1998). A producer for the Montel Williams show misrepresented her identity to gain access to the hospital room of a teacher wounded in the 1998 Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooting (Freedom Forum, 1998). When John F. Kennedy, Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette



Kennedy, and sister-in-law Lauren Bessette were killed in 1999 when Kennedy's plane crashed off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, the Federal Aviation Administration established unprecedented airspace restrictions. The FAA's intent was to protect the privacy of the Kennedy and Bessette families by keeping media and their news gathering equipment at least five miles away from operations to recover the wreckage and human remains. "The FAA found that some pilots promptly violated the restrictions by turning off equipment relaying their aircraft's identification information to air traffic controllers" (Johnson, 1999, paragraphs 26-27). The chairman of the National Transportation and Safety Board summed up a lot of people's feelings when he said, "The media is extremely important to the American system that we all enjoy, and it's extremely important that the media have information. But when the media causes pain and suffering on families at a time of grief, that kind of behavior should not be tolerated" (Johnson, 1999, paragraph 30).

In addition to emotional harm, news media representatives also can knowingly or unwittingly put people at risk of physical harm or loss of life. Some of the most infamous examples have occurred during the reporting on military operations. During the Gulf War in 1991, American correspondents on scene in Israel reported where scud missiles were landing around them (Garner, 2000). This had the possible effect of enabling Iraqis to refine the targeting of subsequent missile attacks to cause greater destruction. When U.S. Marines made a nighttime amphibious landing on the coast of Somalia, reporters were waiting for them with cameras and lights ("Lights! Camera," 1992). Had hostile parties wanted to attack the American military personnel, the reporters on hand would have provided the terrorists with an illuminated shooting gallery.

Other examples of media carelessness or dangerous reporting practices abound.

After the crash of TWA Flight 800, Frank Carven left home for New York City to await word on the fate of his sister and nephew (Freedom Speaks, 1998).

The news media came to my house and flashed it up on the screen and said you know, they're not home now. Telling everybody in the world where we were. So the police had to come and sit outside our house so nobody would break into it. . . . I think the media has to take certain responsibility and think out what is this going to do when I flash this up on the screen? And what is this going to do when I tell America? (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 14)<sup>3</sup>

The Columbine shooting further illustrated how the media, in their zeal to cover a story, can put people at real risk. Robert Bianco said the damage at Columbine "went beyond the usual pattern of mistake, exaggeration and retraction" (1999, p. 1D). During the rampage by Klebold and Harris, some students trapped in the school used cell phones and called media outlets. "Channel 9 anchors asked student callers, live on the air, about their locations while the crisis was underway" (Ostrow, 2000a, p. 6K). Other Denver media outlets "pinpointed SWAT team activity while the siege was in progress" (Ostrow, 2000a, p. 6K). As a result, the Radio-Television News Directors Association suggested several new guidelines for covering hostage-taking crises: Always assume that the hostage-taker has access to the reporting and avoid describing or showing information that could divulge tactics or positions of responding law enforcement officers (Ostrow, 2000a, p. 6K). Just as for medical personnel, one of the primary credos for journalists should be "First, do no harm."

Steven Brill suggests the root cause of journalistic abuses is not a lack of decent reporters or ethical standards, but rather the lack of accountability (Brill, 1999).

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<sup>3</sup> This and other sections from "Covering Tragedy, Episode 522" excerpted with permission of the publisher.

Most journalists wake up in the morning wanting to do good, honorable work, and the airwaves and news pages across the country are filled with daily examples of them doing just that. It's just that any world in which members of a group are accountable only to themselves inevitably breeds a cocooned, warped sense of their own conduct that renders them unaware of the consequences, perceived and real, of what they do. (Brill, 1999, paragraph 11)

### Legal Considerations

The question of where individuals' right to privacy ends and where journalists' First Amendment rights begin is as much at issue in the courts as it is in other public forums. Litwin (1998, p. 1095) writes that the courts have "historically granted great deference to the journalist's First Amendment rights" as well as providing legal protection of routine newsgathering activities in public places. Furthermore, the American legal system has a longstanding legal bias against prior restraint of speech, preferring instead to punish harmful expression after dissemination (Middleton, et al., 1997, p. 57). In practical terms, this means journalists are free to seek out exemplars and cover individuals in legitimate news stories as long as the journalists are not otherwise breaking any laws such as trespassing or breaking and entering.

The right to privacy as it relates to the government derives most directly from the Fourth Amendment, the freedom of citizens from unreasonable search and seizure (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995). Other legal sources for the right to privacy include state constitutions, federal and state statutes, and case law (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995). All but two states (Minnesota and Wisconsin) have recognized the existence of some form of this right (Jehle, 1981).

A number of privacy tort laws have evolved, most notably the torts of private facts and intrusion (Middleton et al., 1997). These torts provide a basis for a plaintiff to sue another person for either disseminating "private information that '(a) would be highly

offensive to a reasonable person and (b) is not of legitimate concern to the public” (p. 163) or for the “physical, electronic, or mechanical invasion of another’s solitude or seclusion” (p. 174). Torts, however, generally would be filed sometime after the news event or crisis (in contrast to injunctive legal actions for which there is little basis in privacy law) and thus arguably are less relevant for purposes of this study.

In any case, however, tort cases involving private individuals and the news media are notoriously difficult to win for a variety of reasons. The First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech and freedom of the press, is considered a “bulwark of liberty” and thus is a powerful shield for many journalistic practices, even if those practices are hurtful or in extremely bad taste (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995, p. 152). The law in this area is relatively young, widely believed to have come into widespread acceptance as recently as 1960 with the publication of Dean William Prosser’s legal article, “Privacy” (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995, p. 155). As such, the case law has been described as everything from “uncharted” to “confusing,” and the standards within the torts as “ambiguous” (Alderman & Kennedy, 1995, p. 156). For example, how exactly should courts define “highly offensive to a reasonable person” or evaluate the “newsworthiness” of a story?

### Media Perceptions of News Coverage

Journalists are sometimes the most critical of the role they play in newsgathering in sensational news stories. Janet Malcolm in her book “The Journalist and the Murderer” wrote one of the most scathing self-indictments.

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is kind of a confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. . . . On reading the article or book in question, [the subject] has to face the fact that the

journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on this story but always intended to write a story of his own. The disparity of what seems to be the intention of an interview as it is taking place and what actually turns out to have been in aid of always comes as a shock to the subject. (Weinberg, 2000, paragraph 10)

Malcolm's contention is that reporters have their own self-interest and are not generally given to putting story subjects' interests before their own. Other journalists besides Malcolm also have publicly wrestled with the conflict of interest between career advancement and the rights and needs of the people whom they seek to interview. Reporter Ginger Casey described the scene as she and others began to seek out children and other eyewitnesses to a deadly schoolyard shooting:

Reporters with any shame at all at least had the decency to pretend to be sheepish; younger, less-experienced reporters boldly knocked on doors with a sense of entitlement. I knew what they would say, I had said it myself, and at times had even half convinced myself I believed it. "There are so many people concerned. . . . At a time like this, it sometimes helps to talk"—as if the media were some kind of confessional font.

I swallowed my shame for knowing that their heartbreak would be my good career move. (Casey, 1999, paragraphs 31-32)

This same theme is echoed repeatedly in analyses of other big news stories such as Columbine.

One of journalism's abiding ironies is that the worst tragedy is also a huge opportunity, and a couple of [The Denver Rocky Mountain] News staffers said they'd be lying if they denied that, after the initial flurry, thoughts of a Pulitzer Prize didn't cross their minds. (Scelfo, 1999, paragraph 37)

"From a journalist's perspective, this is a story a lot of people have been waiting a long time to cover. It is the big story," said an assistant editor at *The Denver Post* (Shepard, 1999, paragraph 11). The journalists are correct. Staffs of both newspapers were awarded Pulitzer Prizes almost a year to the day from the April 20, 1999 massacre:

the Rocky Mountain News in the breaking news photography category and the Post for breaking news reporting (Slevin, 2000).

Television critic Robert Bianco likewise shows low regard for some of the current standards of reporting he's observed, particularly after a catastrophe such as Columbine. With the exception of singling out NBC Today Show anchor Katie Couric for her ability to conduct genuinely sensitive interviews, he felt coverage of the event lacked compassion and restraint:

News organizations need to be far more careful about putting children on camera to recount the horrors they've seen, interviews that not only can damage the child, but can play to an audience's voyeurism. TV is always in a rush, but to prompt a child to move on to the juicy part of her story—as MSNBC's John Gibson did when he asked a high school girl whether she heard someone “begging for their life”—smacks of ghoulishness. (Bianco, 1999, p. 1D)

Sometimes, news media members find themselves on the other end of a news story. Mark Ginther, KSTP assistant news director, found his role reversed one morning when he learned that the deceased victim of a sensational drive-by shooting was his 17-year-old cousin. He immediately took leave from work to assist his family with the ensuing media interest (Lambert, 2000). Even though Ginther understood the needs and the expectations of the press, he still found the experience odd.

I know news people always say this when the tables are turned, but it was kind of unbelievable to be on the other side, fielding the questions, hearing the questions and hearing how we talk. In general, I think reporters are pretty good about respecting the sensitivities of a grieving family, I really do. But the mere fact they've got their job and they come banging on the door creates pressures in an already awful situation. (Lambert, 2000, paragraphs 13-14)

Far from being critical of the role the media play in covering tragedy, some reporters feel their work plays a part in helping participants or the public deal with the event. Schroth (1995, paragraph 7) writes that although journalists seek “the damn great

story,” they also provide comfort by giving participants the language with which to express their pain.

The journalist knows . . . his moral obligation is to help that foundry worker find the language, to be his scream, a scream that takes flesh in bold headlines, pictures, text, and layout that make the story jump off the page into the reader’s heart. (Schroth, 1995, paragraph 14)

Sharkey (1997) quotes similar sentiments among news professionals in the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death. She quotes a Cable News Network editor as pointing out that coverage of Diana’s funeral “enabled millions of Americans to share their grief, and ‘there aren’t many shared experiences that occur these days’” (paragraph 32). Lisa Stark, a correspondent for ABC News, has said that although it is awkward, it is not usually difficult to find exemplars.

Usually there are some family members who want to talk. I mean it may be hard to believe, but some people want to tell you about the person they lost. It’s part of their grieving process. Also, in a sense, they’re saying, “This was an important person. I want you to know what this person was about, what they did.” (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 18)

Stark and other reporters point out that they and many other journalists seek to treat exemplars with compassion and respect.

People may not believe this, but there are times I have turned off the camera when people start crying. . . . There’s no question television is about emotion. But if you’re on a one-on-one individual interview with someone, you don’t need to see them break down on camera. (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 37-39)

Indeed, recent literature has documented the psychological and emotional toll on the reporters who cover tragic news events. Ricchiardi (1999) writes that reporters are potential secondary victims of trauma by the function they perform. “Researchers point out that the media, in helping audiences see and feel human tragedy, must process information profoundly to convey it effectively. And that can spark greater emotional

turmoil” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 37). Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Kevin Carter took his own life just months after taking the photograph that would mark the pinnacle of his career (Ricchiardi, 1999). Carter called his experience of documenting a vulture stalking a starving Sudanese girl “the most horrifying of my career” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 38). Another photojournalist expounded on this theme. “Nobody does this kind of work to make themselves feel good. It is very hard to continue” (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 38). Gary Matsumoto, reporter for Fox News, likewise described covering the crash of TWA Flight 800 as “one of the most excruciating experiences I have ever gone through” (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 1).

Some attention is being paid to the emotional cost of covering dramatic news stories. After a deadly school shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998, crisis action teams considered facilitating groups to enable journalists to process the tragedy (Poland & McCormick, 2000). The idea ultimately was dropped because reporters were too busy covering the story. Newsrooms have begun to offer debriefing sessions after particularly wrenching news events and to offer counseling to staff members feeling the cumulative strain of reporting bad news (Ricchiardi, 1999; Scelfo, 1999; Shepard, 1999).

Admitting the need for outside assistance is too big a pill for many journalists to swallow. Ricchiardi writes, “Journalists may be heartbroken by the misery they witness, but [as one reporter] says, ‘We can’t act like it or we can’t get the job done’” (1999, p. 39). Some reporters may equate allowing themselves to get emotional to getting “too close to a story,” and therefore losing their ability to report objectively. Others are uncomfortable acknowledging their trauma in light of the depth of suffering of individuals and families central to the news event. “There are so many real victims out



there,” said one reporter (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 39). “What’s happened to us is so much less,” said another (Ricchiardi, 1999, p. 39).

Another means of coping is through compartmentalizing their feelings. They [editors] pat us on the back when we bring back “great” pictures, but then, they are already on to the next program. Yesterday’s news is gone. So, far too many of us take these cues, become insensitive ourselves, go out armed with notepads and microphones, intrude on human suffering, demand that people share their grief with us. Our push to show reality in an “objective” way separates us from our own feelings and, too often, separates us from the feelings of others. It creates a funny kind of schizophrenia within those of us who work in the business. Our work is most valuable when it moves others. But it’s not supposed to move us. And it creates a funny kind of catch-22 with the viewing public. People don’t believe us when we show no feelings toward tragedy; they don’t believe us when we do. (Casey, 1999, paragraphs 34-36)

When asked why media engage in the difficult and often personally unpleasant task of covering tragic news stories, reporter Lynn Lunsford responded:

Because in the case of a plane crash, for example, if you do not know anything about who the people were on that airplane, then it’s just another machine that broke. What makes it important to you and me and the reason we want to know about this plane crash is because there were real people on it. And they were more than just the name on the victim list. They were people who had lives, who were going about their lives and obviously didn’t plan for this to happen. (Freedom Speaks, 1998, paragraph 8)

Associated Press reporter Jay Reeves found no difficulty in finding exemplars after a devastating tornado in Alabama that killed 33 people. He said all the survivors were willing to talk to him (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 4). Reeves rationalizes the potential hurt his stories may cause people by looking also at the good the stories can bring. “They’re getting something out of telling their stories. Victims often find it therapeutic to talk to reporters,” he said (O’Brien, 1998, paragraph 5).

### Expressing Pain and the Grief Process

Literature in the field of bereavement counseling and grief work bears out the benefit of expression in cases of profound personal loss. Cleiren (1991) reports research suggesting that expressing the painful effects of loss is a common task in successful adaptation. Harvey, Weber, and Orbuch (1990) as discussed in Harvey (1996) describe outcry, or the expression of pain, as a requisite early step in their model of recovery from major loss. Harvey posits that this sharing of pain, in the traditional narrative form of story telling, gives the bereaved an opportunity to engage in meaning making, without which there can be no healing.

In her book dealing with recovery from loss, Carol Staudacher emphasizes the connection between talking and healing. “You need to tell your story; not once, but repeatedly. . . . As you recount your experience, you benefit by both a physical and emotional release” (Staudacher, 1987, p. 201). This same message was the theme of a sermon given in a Unitarian church near Littleton, Colorado, on the Sunday after the violence at Columbine High School that left 15 people dead:

In the two days following my hearing of the news [of the shooting] . . . I found that I needed to tell my story—my story of how I heard the news and how it impacted me . . . I realized that each one of you has a story that needs to be told—again, and again, and again. It is in the telling of the stories that the healing begins. (Dowgiert, 1999, paragraph 2)

Healing occurs not just in the telling of one’s story, but in the process of controlling that story. Christy Brzonkala defied newspaper convention by refusing to allow her identity to be shielded in media coverage after her rape in a college dormitory (Morse, 2000). Her message was “I am not another number. I am an actual human being, with a first and last name” (Morse, 2000, p. 10).

The families of two people killed in the Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooting said that some media coverage helped them with the healing process when the news pieces made their loved one “alive for people” (Freedom Forum, 1998, pp. 11-12). “Once you read this article—she did this, she liked this, she liked that—it makes you realize this was a real little girl. . . . That brought me a lot of comfort to see that article,” said the mother of slain 11-year-old Britthney Varner (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 12).<sup>4</sup>

As delivery of news and information becomes more interactive as through Internet or other emerging technology channels, the news media may have a greater claim to assisting people with dealing with traumatic news events. For example, following Columbine, America Online offered subscribers a real-time chat with bereavement and high school crisis management counselor Linda Remolino (April 21, 1999, hosted by AOL News) and Columbine student Kimberly Lorenz (April 24, 1999, hosted by StageLive). Topics included why the tragedy occurred and how to handle the resulting fears school children across the country may have felt as a result. Following the discussions, participants were pointed to web sites such as “coping with school violence” for more information. Increasing communications capabilities may alter aspects of the media’s role following tragedies by enabling audiences to ask questions of “experts” directly.

Some psychiatrists believe that healing also may be facilitated by exposure to media stories that feature positive responses or outcomes to traumatic events (Pfefferbaum et al., 1999). Following the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, researchers surveyed more than 3,000 area school children to study

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<sup>4</sup>This and other sections from “Jonesboro: Were the Media Fair?” excerpted with permission of the publisher.

posttraumatic stress responses. Two thirds of the youths reported that “most” or “all” of their television viewing in the aftermath was bomb-related. The researchers found that “for some, television coverage may have provided the information needed to initiate healing as it chronicled first the heroic rescue and then the steadfast rehabilitation of a community determined to recover” (p. 1376). Overall, however, the study seemed to raise more concern about the saturation of traumatic stimuli. In other words, between physical remains of the blast and extensive and continuing media coverage of the community grief and criminal proceedings, it was essentially impossible to get away from reminders of the tragedy. One strategy for helping clinicians assist people affected by trauma and loss may be to find ways for clients to reduce “unnecessary exposure to ‘avoidable’ reminders” (p. 1377).

Whether the media can play a therapeutic role in the grieving or healing process remains a contentious issue. The director of the District of Columbia Rape Crisis Center says media coverage often does form a second victimization because of victims’ lack of control. Her assessment of situations involving rape is equally applicable in other incidents where individuals or families suffer tragedy:

One of the key things a survivor has to do is regain a sense of power. One of the ways she does this is by controlling the story: how much is told, when it’s told, how it’s told. She has control over the information and how it gets disseminated. In a high-profile case, that power is completely taken away. The media makes the determination. That greatly exacerbates the healing process. In many ways, it mimics the assault itself. (Morse, 2000, p. 10)

Psychologist and crisis intervention expert Dr. Scott Poland cites research that found that verbalizing a traumatic experience is a critical element in promoting recovery (Poland & McCormick, 1999). Expressing feelings in the form of crisis stories leads to having those feelings validated, and in turn, fostering a faster return to normalcy. He is

quick to advise, however, that processing reactions with the media is not in people's best interest. "Media representatives have neither the mental health training nor, in many cases, the desire to truly assist school community members in processing their crisis reactions. The media's priority is to get a good story" (Poland & McCormick, 1999, p. 154). Poland and McCormick later continue:

After all, these professionals are on the scene to gather and disseminate information, not as caregivers. And they won't be there to support their interview subjects seconds after they get the quote they need. They're on to the next witness, the next story angle, leaving the traumatized person who has just expressed his or her emotions without support. (Poland & McCormick, 1999, p. 272)

### Story Ownership

Perhaps the central question regarding the appropriateness of news coverage and the experience of exemplars is best captured in the analysis of news coverage of the Columbine High School shooting. Dave Cullen of Salon.com Internet magazine wrote a column entitled "Who owns the Columbine tragedy?" (Cullen, 1999). The question is a good one.

Many Littleton area residents felt the tragedy belonged to the community and that the media's behavior and coverage had gone too far. A 17-year-old survivor of the shooting wrote:

I'm also saddened by a lot of the news coverage of Columbine. Some reporters respected our grief, but many were insulting. As one TV reporter primped for the camera, he was heard to say: "Do I look devastated enough?" And even people who hated Dylan and Eric [the shooters] were appalled by the magazine cover that called them "The Monsters Next Door." They were our friends, too. They were just kids. But someone had to make monsters out of them. (Adams, 1999, p. 41)

Nowhere was this antipathy toward the media more evident than on the day Columbine students returned to classes. More than 400 parents and school supporters

formed a human chain to keep reporters and photographers away from students.

“Mostly, I’m just here to keep people like you away,” one member of the chain said.

“These kids need their peace. Enough already” (McDowell, 1999, paragraphs 16-17).

Others, however, saw the entire back-to-school rally as one big event designed for the media. “Ironically, the main story will likely be a giant choreographed ritual, where students symbolically ‘Take Back the School’ from the media, who they believe have turned their home into a national symbol of mass murder and youth violence” (Cullen, 1999, paragraph 1). A 15-year-old Columbine student echoed the intent of using the media to send a message:

People want to see us go back into that school. What happened here hit the world as one big tragedy. It’s news. We’ll go back and be proud of being rebels. Going in shows courage. *We want the world to see it.* [emphasis added] (McDowell, 1999, paragraph 15)

The intentional or unintentional contradictory actions and statements of Columbine students, school officials, and South Jefferson County community members may reflect our general lack of understanding of exemplification and the interaction of exemplars and news media representatives in times of crisis.

Families of victims of the Columbine massacre also actively sought to control the tone of local news media coverage at the one-year anniversary of the event (Ostrow, 2000a). A large number of family members of slain students held a press conference to urge restraint in coverage and to “head off hounding by the media” (p. 6K). A local news director said she felt there had been more pressure exerted by the families than she had ever seen (p. 6K). Tom Brokaw called the situation “a dilemma” (p. 6K). He and other journalists understood why families did not want to dredge up painful memories and

images but felt obligated to revisit the story because of its continuing national significance.

Another trend is further blurring the lines of story ownership. As Richard Turner wrote in *Newsweek*, "The media are part of the story, too" (1999, p. 45). Two recent sensational news stories showcase how intertwined journalists may become with the subjects and events they cover.

A Fort Lauderdale, Florida man, Emilio Nunez, claimed he became enraged at his ex-wife in the course of giving a 1993 television interview on the subject of his daughter's recent suicide ("Woman's Shooting," 2000). Nunez blamed his ex-wife for their daughter's death. When the ex-wife unexpectedly showed up at the interview location, Nunez shot her to death. At the January 2000 trial, Nunez' defense attorney claimed the journalist incited the murder by asking questions designed to elicit an emotional response. The journalist's television network countered that the reporter was just a "good journalist who was pursuing a story" ("Woman's Shooting," 2000, paragraph 1). Nunez was convicted. Where the true blame lies may actually never be known, but the story was made more powerful and disturbing by the capture of the murder on videotape as the reporter screamed, "Film it! Film it!" ("Woman's Shooting," 2000, paragraph 1)

Reporters also found themselves becoming a part of the story of the Elian Gonzalez saga. Five-year-old Elian came to public attention after being rescued from the ocean, a surviving member of a group of Cuban refugees attempting to immigrate illegally to the United States. A worldwide audience watched as Elian's future played out in the media. Would he be returned to his surviving father in Cuba? Would he be granted asylum and allowed to stay in America with relatives? The issue came to a head

when federal agents raided the home of Elian's Miami relatives in order to return the boy to his father. An Associated Press photographer took photos that night that became the touchstone of the debate over the appropriateness of the raid. The photos showed a heavily armed federal agent and an obviously terrified Elian. The photographer, Alan Diaz, shot that picture by hopping a fence and running inside the house just before the start of the pre-dawn raid (Diaz, 2000). Diaz writes that in the course of chronicling Elian's life for the Associated Press for five months, he had developed an unusual relationship with the Gonzalez family. One might question Diaz's unusual access to the home and his objectivity after months of documenting Elian's life, but it would be difficult to dispute that the dramatic image Diaz captured helped frame the debate over the boy's future.

The ability for a photographer to position himself inside a private home before sunrise to take an important photograph is a subtle example of how journalists may go beyond witnessing an event, and become an element of a story. Edna Buchanan, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist in Miami, wrote about the more obvious involvement of the media in the Gonzalez family saga (Nichols, 2000). Buchanan described how the generally quiet scene outside the Gonzalez home changed when it was time for a news feed. "Then protesters magically appeared, waving signs and shouting for the cameras, which came to life and recorded the staged demonstration" (Nichols, 2000, paragraph 14). The implication is that the media were not simply witnessing news, but rather was *causing* news as people on all sides of the issue sought to "milk the Elian affair for all it was worth" (paragraph 15).



### Selected Documentary Accounts of Exemplification

Some of the most memorable news coverage involving exemplars has been in spot news as photographers or broadcast crews caught people reacting to the news event as it unfolded. Examples include the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of Oklahoma City fireman Chris Fields carrying the bloodied body of baby Baylee Almon from the wreckage of the Murrah Building. Just as the photo became the icon of the bombing—shockingly displaying the innocence of the victims—the photo also provides an extreme example of the wide-ranging effect a news photo can have on the lives of those associated with the story.

#### Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1995

“You may not realize it, but you know my daughter,” is the beginning of a column the baby’s mother, Aren Almon Kok, wrote for *Newsweek* two years after the tragedy (Almon, 1997, paragraph 1). She continues, “But most people don’t know how that picture has complicated my own coming to terms with the loss of my daughter, Baylee—one of 19 children who died in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.” The loss of her 1-year-old child was just the beginning of the horrific experience she would endure:

The next morning [after the bombing and identifying her daughter at the morgue] I asked for the newspaper. My parents had hidden it. When I finally saw a copy, I knew why. There was the picture of the firefighter. “That’s Baylee!” I said. Then the swarm started. I was afraid to step in front of my door for fear that someone would take my picture. When the doorbell rang, I froze. One reporter brought Chris Fields, the firefighter in the photo, over to meet me. I told him how glad I was that the rescuers got Baylee out so quickly, and I thanked him for holding her so gently. (Almon, 1997, p. 40)

Meanwhile, the firefighter was dealing with his own strong emotions and the ensuing demands for his time. Fields had a “hard time being hailed as a hero” (Peyser, Kaplan, Springen, & Waldman, 1995, p. 10). He was also concerned about being singled

out for credit in what was very much a cooperative rescue effort (Hansen, 1995). He said his most difficult moment was that meeting with Baylee's mother. "I almost got sick to my stomach. I didn't know if she would ask, 'Why didn't you do more?'" (Peyser et al., 1995, p. 10). In an interview for *People Magazine* marking the fifth anniversary of the bombing, Fields said the constant requests for interviews took important time away from his family and seriously strained his marriage (Frankel, Hewitt, & Lambert, 2000). But for a photo used around the world, Fields would have been just another one of the dozens of relatively anonymous rescue workers at the scene.

Almon Kok, too, suffered from being set apart as a result of the famous photo.

Meanwhile, the photo started bothering some of the other parents who lost children. They began to criticize me in the media for getting too much attention while their children were ignored. . . . Criticism from other victims hurt, but commercialization of the photo was worse. Freelance photographers sold the photo rights, and the picture began showing up on T shirts, lapel pins and even telephone cards. . . . Chris and I filed suit to try and control the commercial use of the photo. A judge has ruled against us, saying I was the only person who could recognize Baylee in the picture. We have appealed. (Almon, 1997, p. 40)

The saga of the photo and its meaning continues to the present for Almon Kok.

"Though until recently Aren [Almon Kok] could not bear to look at the picture of her dead child—'If I had my way, I'd take all the negatives and burn them,' she says" (Frankel et al., 2000, p. 58). Nevertheless, Almon Kok recently started a foundation to advocate the use of shatterproof glass in the construction of public buildings, and consented to the use of the photo as part of the foundation's logo (Frankel et al., 2000). "Using the picture this way turns it into something that symbolizes safety and not tragedy," Almon Kok said (Frankel et al., 2000, p. 58).

If there exists a silver lining besides the power of the heart-breaking picture to further a meaningful cause, it may be in the friendship that Almon Kok and Fields

developed. Fields has likened his role in Almon Kok's life as being a big brother (Peyser et al., 1995, p. 10).

Several news events in the latter half of the 1990s spurred debates on media coverage of public and private individuals. The death of Princess Diana in 1997 may have been a watershed event in journalism. Both the public and the media struggled to understand the impact of media coverage for the human subjects, and to determine how much was "fair" and how to define what was "excessive." Media self-reflexivity and public scrutiny continued in the wake of other news events such as the school shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, and at Columbine High School. Perhaps the most comprehensive and significant analysis was a study conducted by the Freedom Forum in Jonesboro (Freedom Forum, 1998).

#### Jonesboro, Arkansas, 1998

On March 24, 1998, 11-year-old Andrew Golden and 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson activated a Westside Middle School fire alarm and then ran outside. As their fellow students and teachers evacuated the building, the boys opened fire with high caliber weapons they had stolen from a relative's house. The chilling shooting was conducted like a turkey shoot and left four young girls and a teacher dead and 11 other students wounded (Freedom Forum, 1998).

Three weeks after the shooting, the Freedom Forum spearheaded a town meeting in Jonesboro to give community members an opportunity to share their perceptions of the news media's coverage (Freedom Forum, 1998). About 300 people attended the meeting (which was also sponsored by the *Jonesboro Sun* and the College of Communications at Arkansas State University) and provided feedback on issues ranging from inappropriate newsgathering to the role of the press in the tragedy. Freedom Forum followed up this

meeting by sending a team of reporters to Jonesboro to explore these issues in more depth (Freedom Forum, 1998).

One of the major findings from this investigation was that most news media members were professional and respectful in their work. Unfortunately, "When it comes to the media, one bad apple gives you a bad opinion as a community of the whole bushel" (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 4).

Virtually everyone interviewed for this report gave the majority of reporters who came to Jonesboro relatively high marks for accuracy and fairness, taste and sensitivity. But the roughly 10 percent who pushed too hard or behaved callously are the ones who are remembered. (Freedom Forum, 1998, pp. 3-4)

Families of the victims and perpetrators were staked out by reporters, with cameras trained upon their homes constantly and reporters climbing fences and hiding in the yard throughout the night (Freedom Forum, 1998). Things came to a head following an intrusion at the home of a victim's family. "A mother was trying to feed her children at the breakfast table, and she looked up and there are one or two still cameras pressed up against the kitchen window. She screamed" (p. 10). The local sheriff then read the media "the riot act" and misbehavior generally subsided.

The media overwhelmed one victim's mother at her daughter's burial (Freedom Forum, 1998). Reporters respected the family's wish that there be no cameras at the funeral service. The scene at the cemetery, however, was another matter. "There were just hordes of reporters and cameras. They were in the trees. They were everywhere. It was unbelievable" (p. 11). One reporter's conduct stood out as especially hurtful to the deceased girl's mother:

There was this one guy, and I'll never forget this picture. We were following behind the hearse and he got right out in the middle of the road and got down on his knee . . . to take a picture of the hearse. I thought to

myself, how morbid. I felt really bad when the guy stepped out in front of the hearse because that was such an important thing to me that she not be exploited in that way. I would have gave him any pictures he wanted of her alive, but I thought this is not the way I want my daughter on TV. (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 11)

The slain child's aunt said the experience changed her perspective. "I have to be fair and say I've watched the same thing for other families. I've sat there and watched it and wanted to see it, you know? It's different when you're on the other side" (p. 11).

Another major finding was the impact of having such large numbers of journalists and producers arrive on scene to cover the story. Within 24 hours, hundreds of media representatives had converged on Jonesboro and the media relations coordinator had received 285 media calls (Freedom Forum, 1998). The husband of slain teacher Shannon Wright received a lion's share of attention because his wife died protecting one of her students. He reported that media called his home continually from 6:30 a.m. on, and the barrage continued until the funeral (Freedom Forum, 1998). The media at the school where the shooting occurred "mobbed" people coming and going and their presence and satellite vans looked like "the midway at a circus" (p. 8). "When a child and [a] family would get out of the car to come to the gymnasium (for counseling), there'd be cameramen and people . . . shoving [microphones] in their faces" (p. 35). The Jonesboro chief of police was especially critical of the media when their presence reached critical mass.

For the most part, if you were dealing with a reporter . . . one on one, they were very sympathetic, seemed to have a lot of sympathy for the folks. But I would have to compare them with a bunch of wild animals whenever they all got together with their cameras. (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 6)

Jonesboro residents also complained about how the news media sometimes portrayed them and their community in the stampede to find understanding and meaning

in the crime (Freedom Forum, 1998). “The news media’s emphasis on the Southern gun culture angle evoked deep resentment in the community” (p. 26). Likewise, “Residents of Jonesboro were portrayed in many stories as ‘in-bred, back-hills people, poorly educated’” (p. 35).

Perhaps another major finding of the Jonesboro study was the difference in how Jonesboro residents perceived the coverage conducted by local and national media. “Local media coverage of the Westside Middle School shootings was mostly balanced, fair, and in good taste” (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 35). In contrast, Jonesboro residents found national media “rude, arrogant, and inaccurate” (p. 35).

The Jonesboro report concludes with a page of lessons for the media (Freedom Forum, 1998, p. 37). Some of the recommendations relevant to this study include the following:

For editors and news directors:

- Avoid demonizing or glorifying suspects or victims.
- Correct errors promptly and prominently in full detail.
- Set standards for the personal and professional behavior of the journalists

covering the story: Obey the law, do not trespass on private property, respect the privacy of those involved.

- Know when the story is over and when to get it off Page One.

For reporters and photographers:

- Remember that when a disaster or violent tragedy occurs, coverage should reflect the fact that the entire community may feel victimized, not just those directly affected.

- Understand that readers and viewers are better able to handle the grim details when they are reported in a larger context of sympathetic and extensive coverage that embraces the experience of the entire community.

- Do not hype an already powerful story or tell it in florid language.

- Avoid drawing quick conclusions, making unsubstantiated assumptions or creating stereotypes.

- Never misrepresent yourself or engage in deception to get the story.

- Report on what went right, what worked when government and the public responded to a major newsworthy event.

- Consider pooling staff and resources to minimize the appearance of a media mob.

It is significant that the lessons of Jonesboro were noted by and acted upon by some media members who later covered the Columbine shooting. A CNN field anchor noted that journalists at Columbine seemed to be on better behavior (Seigel, 1999).

The change was not accidental. A staff memo from CNN chairman Tom Johnson taped to the inside of one van quoted post-Jonesboro recommendations of a media industry group, the Freedom Forum, while admonishing staffers to avoid excesses like front lawn stakeouts and sticking microphones in the faces of grieving families. (Seigel, 1999, paragraph 35)<sup>5</sup>

The initial and continuing attention to media coverage of the Columbine tragedy may signal a continuing call for accountability of journalists and the news industry.

#### Littleton, Colorado, 1999

On April 20, 1999, Columbine students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold came back to their school and began shooting fellow students and teachers. In all, one teacher and

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<sup>5</sup>This and other sections from "Hugging the Spotlight" excerpted with permission of the publisher.

14 students (including Harris and Klebold) were killed, with dozens more injured. Like the Murrah Building bombing, Columbine, too, produced several exemplars whose interviews and images stood out from the hours of broadcast coverage and leapt off the pages of newspapers and magazines. Foremost among these was the video of severely injured student Patrick Ireland climbing out of the second floor library window and being pulled to safety in the arms of a SWAT team. Two other incidents were equally powerful in conveying the extent of the horror at the school: a broadcast interview of Bree Pasquale who survived the carnage in the library, and the photograph of student Jessica Holliday's agonized reaction following learning of the death of her best friend.

"Bree's hysterical voice, distraught expression, and horrifying story stopped hearts across America again and again," according to Jessica Seigel who wrote about Bree's exemplar experience in *Brill's Content* (Seigel, 1999, paragraph 4). Seigel interviewed Bree, her family, and the reporter who snagged one of the most oft-broadcast sound bites from April 20, 1999, and described the scene:

Dazed and spattered with blood, the girl with the pierced eyebrow stood out amid the chaos. Other students who had just escaped the gun assault at Columbine High School huddled together in weeping clumps. But Bree Pasquale wandered around by herself, sobbing.

One of the few local reporters working in the triage area before the national media arrived, KUSA-TV reporter Ginger Delgado approached the girl for an interview. Are you okay? Bree shook her head no, not really. Well, Delgado said gently, could I ask a few questions? Bree agreed.

. . . When the camera switched on, the words tumbled out between the girl's whimpering gulps for air: "Then [he] put a gun to my head and said—asked if we all wanted to die," she said. "I just started screaming and crying and telling them not to shoot me." So, Bree said, the shooter turned to another girl. "He shot her in the head in front of me, and he shot the black kid because he was black, and he shot him in the face." (Seigel, 1999, paragraphs 1-3)

The interview with Bree Pasquale is just the kind of interview that the American public seems to abhor and yet cannot help but watch. Neither Bree nor her family



objected to the interview that was done just following one of the greatest emotional traumas the teenager is likely to endure in her life (Seigel, 1999). They felt it was important for the public “to understand the true depth of horror at Columbine High School” (Seigel, 1999, paragraph 6).

Bree’s father later explained that in today’s world, talking to the media is a part of any tragedy (Seigel, 1999). “When something like this happens, we’re overwhelmed with curiosity. Because it happened to my family, I can’t be hypocritical and say, ‘Why are the cameras here?’ When it happens everywhere else, I want to know” (Seigel, 1999, paragraph 18).

Like Bree Pasquale and her family, some other Littleton area residents shared the feeling that it was important that the horror of the Columbine school shooting be conveyed fully (Seigel, 1999). Parent Cathy Dice was interviewed as she was trying to find out if her daughter was all right. “It was good someone saw me in such a vulnerable moment if that helps this not happen again” (Seigel, 1999, paragraph 6). Dice went on to say that she felt the media were there to support her.

It was a different story for Jessica Holliday, the exemplar the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* described as “the girl in the picture” (Levitt Ryckman, 1999, p. 1A).

She is a very private person whose very public moment of grief made her the poster child for unspeakable tragedy. . . . Her anguished image showed up on front pages in every corner of the world. The camera caught a pretty face so distorted by despair that only family and friends knew for certain who it was. And only Jessica herself knew what she had been thinking and feeling just then. But that didn’t stop the world from claiming her pain as their own. (Levitt Ryckman, 1999, p. 22A)

So private and devastated was Holliday by the shooting and the death of her life-long best friend, she reportedly went into seclusion for weeks after April 20th with the exception of speaking at Lauren Townsend’s funeral (Fields-Meyer, Hewitt, Rogers, &

Smolowe, 1999). She has said she does not like the photo, and although it has “touched millions,” it “rubs her the wrong way” (Levitt Ryckman, 1999, p. 26A):

It was weird to see myself. I didn't like it, and I still don't like it. I was so sad that day, and so confused. And then here it is, right there. All the stuff I was going through, and everybody could see it. (Levitt Ryckman, 1999, p. 26A)

Holliday also seemed to resent that strangers could look at the picture and believe they knew what she was thinking and feeling (Levitt Ryckman, 1999). While most people interpreted the photo as a young woman crying, Holliday says at that instant, she was praying and wondering how this could be happening to her school and classmates.

The photographer who took the photograph, George Kochaniec, Jr., remembers thinking about his own teenaged children as he arrived at the location near Columbine High School and saw 30 or 40 emotional students (“Photographer,” 1999). He said, “I was shooting mostly with really long lenses so I could stay a respectful distance. I felt bad enough being there” (“Photographer,” 1999, p. 23A). While he is aware Jessica Holliday does not like the photo, he hopes she understands “that her picture helped the world comprehend what happened at Columbine” (“Photographer,” 1999, p. 23A).

“A good picture is one that causes you to react,” says Newsweek director of photography James Colton. “It makes you cry, it makes you laugh, it makes you mad. But most of all, it makes you look, and perhaps look again. And if it brings you a better understanding of the world as we know it, then it has done its job” (“Every picture,” 1996, p. 59). If there is a common thread running through these documentary accounts of exemplars, it is that there is not a common thread. For many people, being an exemplar is every bit as bad as the American public believes—and sometimes worse. Others find meaning though the experience as though witnessing for loved ones or significant others. And sometimes, as in the case of one of the mothers of a Jonesboro shooting victim, the

exemplar experience is somewhere in the middle or a little of both: somewhat horrific and somewhat redeeming.

### Rationale and Significance

There is no reason to expect that the public appetite for dramatic news and feature coverage will decline, and news operations will continue to try to meet that demand. Legislative and judicial actions aimed at curbing journalistic abuses and protecting survivors and family members from excessive media intrusion will likely languish in litigation because of the broad protections of the First Amendment and the courts' unwillingness to rule beyond the unique circumstances of the specific cases before them (*Florida Star v. B.J.F.*, 1989). Although conflict may be inevitable among individual privacy rights, news media responsibility to report on the news, and the public interest in tragic happenings, greater understanding of the experience may benefit everyone involved. An extensive review of literature in the fields of psychology, social psychology, victim advocacy, journalism, and mass communication has uncovered very little data or research from the point of view of "private people in the center of a bewildering circle of uninvited press attention" (Biagi, 1986, p. 49).

The focus of this study has universal relevance. Newsworthy events occur almost every day, in most every community. People are almost always the center of a high-interest story, and studies of the use of exemplars in news coverage indicate their effectiveness in concisely and powerfully telling a news story (Aust & Zillman, 1996). Results from this study may be useful in helping journalists tread more carefully in the fragile terrain of people in crisis. Results also may assist public affairs personnel and crisis intervention specialists (e.g., crime victim advocates, chaplains, and counselors) in their work with those unexpectedly thrust into the limelight by tragedy.

### Research Questions

The general research question for this study was “What does the exemplification process mean to exemplars, those people who are generally the ones most affected by the news coverage of tragedies?” Three specific areas of interest derive from this: privacy, process, and outcomes.

The construct of privacy was a central issue in this study. What were exemplars’ expectations of privacy? Did news coverage or reporter involvement affect feelings of security and control? If so, in what ways?

Questions about process sought to establish how the process of exemplification unfolded. What was the manner in which exemplars were contacted, and what language would exemplars use to characterize their interaction with the news media members (positive, negative, humane, ethical)? Since reporters are rarely accused of holding guns to peoples’ heads to get interviews, what were the thoughts and feelings of the exemplars that made them consent to what often turn out to be very emotional and difficult interviews? How did exemplars perceive the actual experience of being interviewed, photographed, or recorded? What about the experience was affirming or uncomfortable? What role did intermediaries play and how did that help or hinder in the crisis situation?

Finally, this study sought to understand the outcomes of the exemplification process on exemplars. What was the meaning exemplars assigned to the event and their role within it? What was the meaning of the news coverage itself? Did it facilitate the healing process or complicate people’s suffering? Have meanings changed or evolved with the passage of time? How do exemplars’ views overlap or diverge from news media’s self critiques? Where do exemplars’ meanings and views overlap, and where do

they diverge? What lessons can exemplars share with us? And finally, what are the implications of the exemplar experience on future research and news coverage?

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative inquiry is a search that leads into others' lives, your discipline, your practice, and yourself. You cannot be sure of what you'll find, but you invariably get caught up in the search and make steps forward.

Corrine Glesne (1999, p. 199)

### Assumptions and Worldview

The dominant worldview in the last two centuries has been that of the logical positivists (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Some key assumptions of positivism are that social facts have an objective reality and that variables can be identified and relationships measured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The social world, as well as the physical world, exists independently of people's perceptions, and this world is an unchanging structure (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Positivists hold that various studies of the same phenomenon may not result in the exact same findings, but will ultimately converge on the same objective reality or truth (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The modern American news media industry developed in a culture of positivism, and members of the American public generally take the tenets of positivism for granted. For most, positivism is not the dominant paradigm, but rather the only paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This outlook may explain the current state of knowledge regarding the exemplar experience. Just as the objective scientist peers at a fruit fly through a microscope, the American public has peered at the media's chronicling of personal crisis and tragedy through the television and newspaper. The scientist records findings in journals and audience members register their opinions in polls or backlash. The last few years have

seen more journalistic reflexivity, with news media members also trying to take an “objective” look at the way they and their industry treat people and package private people’s stories. Metaphorically speaking, the fruit flies and actual exemplars have yet to be heard from!

The underlying assumptions for this study were consonant with the naturalistic worldview. In contrast to positivism’s belief in an objective reality that exists and can be discovered, proponents of the naturalistic paradigm believe multiple realities exist and are constructed by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Positivists seek to discover general laws in the world by breaking things down and operationalizing them so the world ultimately may be controlled and predicted. Naturalists believe things should be studied holistically and in context to produce understanding instead (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Upon a naturalistic foundation then, the ideas of several noted sociological theorists were relevant to this study. Herbert Blumer is one of the major figures in the development of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction holds that individuals “take and make meaning in their interaction with others (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Blumer (1969, p. 50) wrote that “social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them.” Blumer goes on to state that a scholar who wishes to understand the actions of people must first see the world and its objects as these people see it.

Erving Goffman, among other contributions, brought the metaphor of the theater to the subject of human interaction (Goffman, 1959). He posited that people “perform” in roles that are both in and out of character. These performances occur in different

regions; some are front stage and are intended for a more public audience while others are back stage and performed only for an intimate circle or simply the self.

Blumer and Goffman's work suggests human interaction and communication are dynamic and active. Some of the research questions for this study of exemplar perceptions centered on whether the informant played an active or passive role in the media exemplification process. Goffman's framework may be especially useful in analyzing data in this light.

The selection of qualitative research techniques rather than more traditional quantitatively oriented methods followed naturally from adopting the naturalistic worldview and the nature of the research question. But there were many other pragmatic reasons as well. The primary reason was based on the desired outcome from the research, which in this case was understanding and interpretation, not generalizability of findings or causal explanations. Qualitative techniques are necessary for the former, and more positivist-based techniques for the latter (and the approaches are mutually exclusive, according to Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Another reason to select a qualitative approach was an underlying assumption of this study: the intuition that there were more things going on in the exemplification process than were generally recognized or understood. Quantitative research requires an understanding of what is to be measured before suitable instruments can be designed and tested to collect data. Not only would these definitional and operationalization steps be impossible as this study was designed, it would also have defeated the very purpose of the study. In contrast, qualitative investigation would not impose any a priori frameworks on the data, but rather would allow the data to "speak for itself" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).



Other aspects of this study made a qualitative approach preferable to a quantitative or positivistic-based model. First, the topic concerns what for most informants would likely be highly meaningful and emotional life events. The very presence of a human researcher over a sterile data collection instrument would show more consideration of the informant as a fellow human being. In an emotion-laden environment, a human researcher also can alter or halt the interview as necessary and convey comforting empathic understanding.

### Researcher Subjectivity

An important assumption in the naturalistic paradigm is that perfect objectivity in research is impossible given that researchers are human and all see the world through unique subjective lenses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers seek to identify and understand their own cultural assumptions to help prevent unknowingly ascribing these points of view to the people or questions being studied. This technique, credited to the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1970), is called bracketing (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

The researcher's interest in this subject is rooted in her experience as an Air Force public affairs officer. Following profound tragedies, such as the terrorist bombing of the Khobar Towers or the death of a single but well-known and respected airman, reporters would contact her office to ask for help covering the story. The facts were not hard to get; these reporters wanted to interview family members and co-workers. Supervisors resisted, feeling they were "taking care of their people" by shielding them from the media. Apart from being in the middle of the issue, the primary researcher wondered if this was, indeed, the best way to assist bereaved families. Just because the public affairs office did not forward media requests to a family did not mean that the media would not

still just show up at the family's house or call the family on the phone. As a public affairs officer, the primary researcher is neither media nor victim/exemplar, and this lack of a direct personal stake in the research outcomes may assist in "listening to the data."

In addition to a professional involvement with this subject, the researcher did bring a major working hypothesis to this research. This framework concerned locus of control, a personality construct that differentiates people by whether they feel they control important aspects of their lives (internal locus of control) or whether other people or forces exert that control (external locus of control) (McCombs, 1991; Rotter, 1954). The assumption that exemplars are exploited suggests an external locus of control. The working hypothesis was that the construct of locus of control may relate to whether exemplars construct their exemplification as a positive or negative experience. In addition, the pervasive perception of the news media as being intrusive suggests a common underlying assumption that exemplars are passive. If, contrary to this, exemplars are active and rational in consenting to interviews, perhaps they are seeking some form of gratification from the experience. So a second area of interest is questioning whether it is possible exemplars may be seeking to satisfy uses and gratifications which scholars do not yet fully understand.

### Research Design

After framing the worldview and overarching and subordinate areas of interest for this inquiry, many important planning steps remained. The first was to identify the population that had experienced exemplification. Miles and Huberman call this "bounding the territory" (1994, p. 25). The next two steps went hand in hand: choosing an appropriate method for collecting data and selecting the strategy for sampling.

### Bounding the Territory

Simply defining an exemplar as a victim or eyewitness who provides a reaction or testimonial regarding a newsworthy event was not sufficient to keep the focus of the study to a manageable and productive level. Exemplars could be categorized in many ways based on characteristics of the exemplification experience. Table 1 sets out many such characteristics and dimensions that reflect the range of possibilities. Clearly, any one of these characteristics would make a compelling study in and of itself. However, because of the exploratory nature of this project, the primary researcher sought both to recruit informants who represented a cross section of these characteristics and dimensions, and people who had endured profound circumstances. Put more simply, the researcher hoped to cast a net both wide and deep.

Therefore, for purposes of this study, every effort was made to recruit informants who were most directly involved in the news event (survivor or close family member or friend of a victim); who suffered a profound loss or life-changing event; and whose story was widely publicized at the regional or national level. Most grief models posit that people exist in a state of shock or numbness immediately following awareness of a major loss or following the life-changing event. This, then, would be the time that conventional wisdom would hold potential exemplars are most vulnerable to exploitation. In line with this, then, the researcher recruited as many informants as possible who were sought out by the media within 24 to 48 hours of the precipitating event. In this vein, a theoretically ideal informant candidate might be a family member of the victim of a major airline accident or a survivor of a natural disaster such as a tornado.

Insofar as possible, the researcher also sought variety in the informants' backgrounds and experiences as a heuristic to help identify as many themes as possible.

Table 1

The Range of Exemplification Experience Characteristics

Characteristics	Dimensional Continua
Duration of news event	One time—short duration—long-term—ongoing
Level of involvement with news story	Personal/direct (survivor)—close family—relative/friends—witness
Exemplar stance	Villain—neutral/unknown/uncast—hero
Media coverage	Local—regional—national—international  One encounter—multiple interactions—numerous interactions  Print—radio/TV—all media types
Media Relations Experience	None—some indirect—some direct—extensive—professional communicator
Exemplar Compensation	None—pro forma/in-kind—lucrative
Nature of Event	Joyous—neutral—tragic
Scale of Loss	None—some property—extensive property—loved one(s) injury—loved one(s) death
Control	Passive involvement (photograph taken, conversation overheard)—on-the-spot (“ambush” interviews)—active involvement (advance consent to interview)
Physical Risk/Danger	Low—average—high

An informant with experience as a journalist, for example, may have been able to contribute perspectives from “both sides of the fence.” Another example is that the presence of media may foster quite different meanings for people whose story had a happy ending rather than those whose experience was one of profound permanent loss.

#### Data Collection Method

Choosing the most effective data collection method was simplified using criteria supplied by Glesne (1999) and a process of elimination. Glesne suggests researchers choose techniques that “are likely to (1) elicit data needed to gain understanding of the phenomenon in question, (2) contribute different perspectives on the issue, and (3) make effective use of time available for data-collection” (p. 31).

In general, focus groups would be complicated to schedule and might have precluded more reserved informants from sharing difficult experiences or conflicting interpretations. A case study approach might have limited the breadth of the study by focusing on one event or exemplar. Participant observation would be problematic not only from the standpoint of access (finding and getting to locations where exemplification is occurring), but because of the role of the researcher. As a pure observer, the researcher would not have access to participants’ views and interpretations. A more active data collection stance, with the researcher questioning participants as events unfold, opens the possibility of the researcher exploiting people at times when they are not prepared to consider conditions of informed consent. This would be doing one of the very things this study was designed to explore. The method of long interviews with informants as recommended by McCracken (1988) was the best fit for the data collection strategy.

No data collection method is perfect, however. The long interview method is susceptible to bias due to poorly constructed questions, inaccuracies because of poor

recall by informants, and reflexivity, with informants relaying what they believe the researcher wants to hear (Yin, 1994). The advantages of the long interview method far outweighed the risks for purposes of this study. Long interviews offered a targeted method (focused on the research topic), and even more importantly, a means to “learn about things that cannot be observed directly by other means” (Patton, 1990, p. 278, as quoted in Lindlof, 1995, p. 166). McCracken (1988) calls the long interview one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory. “The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves” (McCracken, 1988, p. 9).

The primary researcher developed a relatively short question guide with probes (Appendix A) designed to elicit data in the areas of privacy, the exemplification process, and outcomes. The initial plan was to speak with informants individually, while reserving the option to interview in a group setting at the discretion of the researcher or informants. The researcher met with a total of seven informants in this format (in three interview sessions), which was more than expected. In most cases, it simply was more convenient for the informants and researcher to meet this way. In one case, the profound impact of the exemplification event coupled with the event having occurred relatively recently made a family group setting more comfortable.

Conducting some interviews in a group setting provided some unexpected benefits. In several instances, spouses were able to prompt each other in ways in which the interviewer would not have known to do. In others, family members offered differing reactions to unfolding events, which inspired further discussion of meanings. In all the cases of the group interviews, informants (even being within the same family) had vastly different experiences, with one member having survived the precipitating event and the

others initially uncertain of their loved one's welfare and coping with the resulting trauma.

Where possible, individual and group narratives were augmented with documentary evidence in the form of written and broadcast news coverage; books, official documents, and reports relating to the unfolding of events; and any personal documents or materials informants volunteered to share (e.g., photographs and videotapes, etc.).

Except in exceptional circumstances, all interviews were planned to be done in person, preferably in the home of the informant. The rationale was that in-person interviews would provide richer data through access to nonverbal communication. As it was, there was one exceptional circumstance where the researcher and an informant rescheduled an interview due to a snowstorm. That interview was done by telephone, with both the researcher and informant in secluded rooms in their respective homes several states apart. At least from the researcher's perspective, this physical barrier did not impede this particular interview or overly interfere with establishing trust and rapport, probably because the informant was very at ease with the subject matter. These strategies yielded rich data and fostered maximum collaboration with research informants.

### Sampling Strategy

The overall sampling strategy for this study was based on the theoretical considerations outlined previously, but also on pragmatic logistical grounds. Traveling great distances to conduct individual interviews in different locations would have been prohibitively expensive and time-consuming. The researcher reviewed seminal news events with the purpose of identifying a few geographic areas that might yield the quality and quantity of informants necessary to support this study. The researcher selected the

regions of Denver, Colorado; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and North Florida as data collection centers.

The Denver suburb of South Jefferson County (generally, but incorrectly, identified as Littleton) was the location of the Columbine High School shooting in April 1999. To date, it was the deadliest school shooting incident in American history (“Anatomy of a massacre,” 1999). That tragedy left 15 people dead and involved literally hundreds of survivors, family members, and potential exemplar informants. As a school system spokeswoman said, “We had 2,000 sources, also known as students, running through the park, the neighborhood, and the media were going to students” (Lipsher, 1999, p. 1B). Because the tragedy was so recent, the thought was informants may have more vivid recollections of their experience and the meanings they have associated with that day and its aftermath. Again, pragmatic considerations also guided this decision-making. The primary researcher is from a nearby Colorado city (Fort Collins) and this may have helped establish rapport in the recruitment and trust-building stages. Additionally, a child psychologist in Littleton whose son was a Columbine student at the time (and escaped uninjured) offered to act as a key informant, intermediary in requesting interviews with other Columbine families, and as a member checker. This collaborator had extensive connections in counseling circles in the area, and was herself an exemplar for a major regional radio station and *Nightline* with Ted Koppel.

For many of the same reasons, Oklahoma City also was likely to have an extremely large pool of potential exemplar informants. The April 19, 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building killed 168 people and has been called “the worst attack of terrorism in the history of this country” (Kight, 1998, p. 17). More than four and a half years passed between the bombing and the data collection for this study.



Comparing and contrasting accounts from Columbine and Oklahoma City provided the opportunity to explore implications of the passage of time as people ascribed meanings to their experiences. The researcher obtained her master's degree from the University of Oklahoma in Norman just 20 miles away, and this fact may also have facilitated site entry and rapport building with informants.

The final geographic data collection area—North Florida—was proposed for reasons of cost (within driving distance) and access (much more researcher flexibility in scheduling). Theoretically, the area also offered the potential to obtain more variety of experiences by seeking out news events other than the bombing and school massacre. The proximity of a number of exemplars who had experienced widely-publicized acts of international terrorism helped define the third subset of informants: people who had survived a hostage-taking event or had a loved one taken hostage.

The sampling strategy for the data collection was a combination or mixed method (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and included maximum variation (achieved primarily by recruiting exemplars with a variety of experiences), critical case (thus the selection of the two landmark tragedies of Oklahoma City and Columbine), and snowball cases. The intent of the maximum variation sampling was not generalizability of findings, but rather to provide saturation of themes and transferability of findings within various contexts.

The critical case was appropriate for this study because exemplification experiences conceivably vary in scale. Having one reporter come and go from your house differs greatly from having several dozen reporters and camera crews camped out on your lawn for several weeks. Having your sound bite broadcast one day in your hometown is not the same experience as having it broadcast repeatedly worldwide on Cable News Network. Arguably, the latter instances would be the most intrusive, disruptive, and life-changing. In turn, these cases might be more revealing.

Because of the inherent difficulty in identifying, locating, seeking, and obtaining interview participation consent from informants, the snowball sampling technique proved effective in recruiting informants. Potential informants were far more likely to consider the request to participate in this study if the researcher was referred to them by someone they knew and trusted.

Finally, the sampling strategy also included seeking out disconfirming cases. This became especially important after the first round of interviews in Colorado when the majority of exemplar interactions with the news media were evaluated in mostly positive terms. As this study was conceived to explore the full range of the exemplar experience, the researcher attempted to find contrary experiences and attempted to understand what accounted for the different interpretations. While the focus of this project was on people in crisis, it also included interviews with informants whose stories had joyous outcomes. This offered another opportunity to compare and contrast experiences and meanings.

#### Feasibility and Emergent Design

One hallmark of qualitative research is the concept of emergent design, or the ability to refine the protocols of a study even after the research has begun (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher field-tested the feasibility of this overall study by approaching the initial data collection in Colorado as a preliminary study. The intent was to explore potential challenges such as whether key exemplars could be contacted, to ascertain whether exemplars would agree to yet another interview for research purposes, to gauge how comfortable informants would be self-disclosing and describing their roles in highly emotional events, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the long interview question guide (Appendix A). Another feasibility issue was whether younger informants

would have the depth and breadth of life experiences necessary to verbalize and make sense of their experiences.

During a two-week visit to Colorado November 4 through 18, 2000, the researcher conducted interviews with 13 informants. This initial effort resulted in several important lessons learned. Most importantly, the study demonstrated how much more effective it was to seek interviews through intermediaries known to the potential informants. One person agreed to an interview for about every six “cold calls” made. While only one potential informant hung up on the researcher, only one person returned a call when a message was left on the home answering machine. Time spent networking and making personal contacts in advance is critical to making effective use of limited travel time and in recruiting high quality informants. Without the key informant in Denver, the data collection there would have been far less productive.

One challenge was finding better ways to ask informants to share their meanings of the exemplification process. Another challenge was to improve on probes to help draw out the understandings of younger or less verbal informants. The researcher found that an effective technique for the data collection was to revisit the exemplar’s experience using the general research areas of interest of privacy, process, and outcomes as a guide. As the interview wound down, the researcher then read aloud the questions on the guide and researcher and informant discussed in what ways the question had been covered or required more discussion.

Overall, the preliminary study validated every aspect of the proposed study but identified areas where the methodology could be refined.

### Summary of Data Collection and Informant Pool

The researcher received University of Florida Institutional Review Board and Air Force approval before beginning the data collection for this study. The purpose of the IRB review is to protect research participants from harm by ensuring study protocols include appropriate procedures for informed consent and that studies do not put participants at physical or psychological risk. Informed consent forms are at Appendix B. The Air Force Institute of Technology approval was required under terms of funding provided to the researcher to ensure research was purposeful, well designed, and potentially beneficial to the government. The Air Force Institute of Technology also funded the data collection travel to Colorado and Oklahoma.

The researcher conducted 23 interviews (with two family members making additional impromptu but relevant contributions). Interviews took place over the course of four months, from mid November 1999 to mid February 2000.

The researcher solicited informants in several ways. The least successful method was noting names and any other identifying information directly from print and broadcast news stories and then looking up phone numbers in directories and on the Internet—just as reporters might do. One potential informant hung up on the researcher, but most simply chose not to pick up or return the phone call. In fact, only one informant actually did return the researcher's call.

The most effective technique was obtaining help from intermediaries: those with a personal or professional interest in the research. A key informant in Denver assisted with introductions to two other informants. She also introduced the researcher to a counselor who, after reviewing the research project, acted as a go-between in soliciting informants from two additional families that were at the epicenter of the Columbine shooting.

In Oklahoma City, the researcher found informants in several ways. In addition to making “cold calls,” she requested assistance in the form of leads from the public affairs staff at Tinker Air Force Base and from a coeditor of a collection of first person accounts of how the bombing changed people’s lives forever. Informants also often recommended and provided introduction to other potential informants. To solicit former hostages and their family members as informants, the researcher used a combination of cold calls and personal and professional contacts.

The researcher interviewed 11 people in November 1999 who were associated with the Columbine shooting. These included four students, six parents, and a community resident who was related to a Columbine student and covered the incident for a national publication. Some of the exemplars were interviewed by the news media literally dozens of times. Others preferred to avoid interacting with the media as much as possible and were especially protective of their privacy. The group included a student who had been severely injured by gunfire and another who witnessed some of the violence and was trapped in the school building for hours. One family’s experience included having a front lawn full of media for days.

Interestingly, two informants were also witness to or participants in other major news stories. One lived in a neighborhood ravaged by a tornado that killed more than 30 people. Another was working at the American Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, and narrowly escaped injury when terrorists bombed the building (as well as the American Embassy in Tanzania) in 1998.

In Oklahoma, the researcher met with six informants in January 2000, and then conducted a phone interview with a seventh. Again, informants had a great variety of experiences. One lost a parent and another lost two young children in the Murrah

building. One informant survived the blast and was rescued by firefighters on live television. Several informants worked at the bomb site after the explosion in a variety of search, rescue, and recovery roles.

The final group of five informants had experienced a terrorist hostage-taking event, either first-hand (2) or as an immediate family member (3). Two interviews were conducted in Colorado in November 1999, and three in Florida in February 2000. The husband of one of the family member informants was executed by his abductors. Another informant was assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Iran when local demonstrators overran the Embassy and took as hostages all the American personnel they could find.

As well as having a wide variety of exemplification experiences, informants were also demographically diverse. One informant was black and the remainder were Caucasian. Occupations included homemakers, students, police officers, psychologists, professors, military members, and foreign service officers. The informants included 10 men and 13 women ranging in age from 16 to their late 60s. Table 2 displays the age of informants.

Most interviews—all but five—were done at the informants' homes. Others were done in offices (2), a public library conference room (1), an Oklahoma City coffee shop (1), and by phone (1). The reasons for meeting elsewhere ranged from personal security ("never have strangers come to my home") and convenience to self-consciousness about housekeeping. The interview at the coffee shop took place there after the informant provided the researcher with a walking tour of the Murrah bombing site and pointed out physical aspects of the incident.

Table 2

Age of Informants

Age range in years	Number of informants
16 to 20	4
21 to 30	1
31 to 40	6
41 to 50	4
51 to 60	5
61 and older	3
Total	23

The visits and interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to four hours and were taped using a cassette recorder with an external microphone and a microcassette recorder. The accounts of the older informants (in contrast to informants who ranged in age from 16 to 19) appeared to have more interpretation and meaning making than the narratives of the younger informants (which sounded more like chronicles). As expected, some of the interviews were highly emotional. At no point, however, did any informant appear uncomfortable or hesitate about continuing with the interview. Informants seemed genuinely interested in the research, were giving of their time, and thoughtful and forthcoming in their responses. Every interview and every informant produced useful and relevant data.

When transcribed, the shortest interview was 12 pages and the longest was 78. The average number of pages was 32 pages per interview or 27 pages per informant (the difference being that some interviews involved multiple informants).

### Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is the naturalistic paradigm's general counterpart to the issues of reliability and internal and external validity in the positivist paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest trustworthiness can be evaluated by the truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality of the research effort and conclusions. While no widely accepted standard evaluative criteria exist for the qualitative research tradition, Lincoln and Guba's writings provide an effective foundation.

### Lincoln and Guba's Four Criteria

The issue of truth value comes down to the question of whether the research and conclusions are credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They provide two major guidelines for achieving truth value: to carry out a thoughtfully conceived, deliberate, and well executed inquiry and to have informants, as the ultimate experts, review the findings. Methodological elements of this study designed to increase truth value include seeking a sample of informants with maximum variation (within the focus of the study) to effectively represent exemplar experiences and through the use of the long interview format to allow the experts to construct and share their knowledge. Elements of peer debriefing also are incorporated as part of the doctoral dissertation process. The supervisory committee of the researcher included a great amount of collective experience in this tradition. Committee members were available to advise and critique planned and ongoing research strategies. Finally, research findings were provided to informants for feedback in a process called member checking. A key informant from the Columbine exemplars agreed to review working drafts of all findings, and at least three other informants agreed to provide additional member checking as necessary and feasible. The



long interview format and the collection of a large number of quality interviews provided an element of prolonged engagement to ensure data were highly representative of the subject under study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define applicability as whether findings from one study can be applied or transferred to a situation with a similar context. They posit that the burden in transferability is on the researchers striving to make the comparison. However, applicability can be enhanced by ensuring interview questions provoke meaningful responses and informants are encouraged to provide thick description.

Lincoln and Guba's third criterion, consistency, does not imply the possibility of complete replication which some positivist experimental designs claim to be able to achieve. In the first place, as Riessman says, qualitative subjects "do not sit still for their portraits" (1993, p. 15), and are always changing, even minute by minute. In the second place, as Holstein and Gubrium posit, knowledge is created by the action taken to obtain it (1995, p. 3). This is the premise of their book entitled *The Active Interview*. This said, however, a high degree of consistency can be established in terms of consistency of findings with the data, and with data being representative of the informants' state of being at the time of the interview. Several techniques and procedures were built into this study at the data collection and analysis stages to achieve consistency. During data collection, the researcher used interview techniques such as clarifying, paraphrasing, and probing to try and ensure an accurate understanding of the informants' meanings. During data analysis, the researcher attempted to identify, investigate, and account for real and apparent discrepancies in the data. This was done by reviewing interview transcripts, archival media coverage, and other documentary accounts. This not only provided a measure of quality assurance (making certain discrepancies are not transcription errors,

for example), but also illuminated further themes in the data. Finally, an independent qualitative researcher (not otherwise associated with this study) reviewed the interview transcripts from six of the most theoretically relevant informants (two from each seminal news event category who most closely fit the target informant criteria). This additional investigator reviewed the primary researcher's coding notes to validate the subjective coding decisions. The additional investigator looked for questionable interpretations or those requiring further substantiation. She also looked for concepts the primary researcher may have overlooked, and evaluated the primary researcher's findings against her reading of these narratives. While no two people would ever code data in exactly the same way, this procedure helped ensure the primary researcher's coding was plausible and grounded in the data. This strengthened the trustworthiness of the study by providing a measure of triangulation among investigators and by serving as a coder and data quality check per Miles and Huberman (1994). This procedure was not having a second coder (because the additional investigator was not coding from scratch) nor was it an external audit as there was not an audit trail as defined by Halpern (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The additional investigator reported in her independent review that coding notes appeared clear, unbiased, and substantiated by the data.

Lincoln and Guba's fourth element of trustworthiness is neutrality. Once again, the naturalistic paradigm does not claim that true neutrality or objectivity is ever possible. However, researchers are still expected to strive for neutrality or to understand and account for cultural or personal biases they may bring to a study. The primary researcher has sought to identify and account for major issues of researcher subjectivity in a previous section. With an awareness of possible biases on the part of the researcher,

readers can be critical evaluators of whether a research project is sufficiently grounded in the data or whether findings are flawed by researcher subjectivity.

Several other issues related to the trustworthiness of this study. The first issue concerned the ability of people to accurately recall enough about times of trauma in order to be reliable and valuable informants. Lenore Terr, a psychiatrist and expert in the area of memory, has conducted several long-term studies of young people who experienced severe, single-event traumatic events such as the Chowchilla, California, school bus kidnapping (1994). In these studies, she has produced compelling evidence that people not only have a clear memory of many aspects of traumatic events, but in many cases have near photographic recall. If informants can recall traumatic events with great clarity, this logically suggests informants should also be very capable of recalling interpretations and impressions.

The quality of recall by informants in this study generally supported Terr's findings. While informants often did struggle with the chronology of events (e.g., did the radio station call back the first day or the second?), most remembered specific events and encounters in great detail. Some informants, despite the passage of many years, recalled events with impressive clarity. This could be the result of telling their story repeatedly or the nature of the trauma or crisis. In one interview, the researcher expressed surprise at the level of detail the informant was relating. The informant replied: "I live this every day. I hear the explosion every day. I see that building every day. I see the people running. I never forget. It never leaves me too far, and not for very long" (O7-7-7).

#### Transcription Quality

Finally, a possibly often-overlooked aspect of trustworthiness comes in the mechanics of the data collection and processing. For example, to ensure high quality

interview audio tapes, the primary researcher relied on two separate tape recorders, one of which was equipped with a desk microphone with built in signal amplifier. To ensure quality in transcript preparation (Poland, 1995), the researcher engaged an experienced and recommended academic transcriptionist. Prior to preparation of any transcripts actually being prepared, the primary researcher and transcriptionist met and reviewed transcript issues such as degree of verbatim rendering, how to handle unclear segments, and notations. Additionally, the researcher provided quality control of transcriptions by reviewing every initial transcript with the audio tapes of the interview and revising the transcripts as necessary.

The researcher made refinements and corrections on every page of data. Some speakers were simply harder for the transcriptionist to understand due to occasional tape glitches, ambient noise, or speakers' accents. Changes included replacing "exclusion" with "in seclusion" and "builds content" with "Brill's Content." Some changes were minor, such as indicating subtle differences in tone or shades of meaning by adjusting punctuation. Some revisions consisted of changing just a few words; however, the change or emphasis in the meaning was significant. For example, the initial transcription of one informant's response read:

Informant: And you know what? They use us, certainly, to make profits, but guess what? We just come right back to get the truth out.

The revised version read:

Informant: And you know what? They use us, certainly, to make profits, but guess what? *We use them right back* to get the truth out!

"We use them right back" conveys a far more specific and deliberate sense of agency than does "we just come right back."

Another example of a change in the shade of expression was this:

Initial transcript: I was surprised that he wasn't going to ask me questions.

Revised transcript: I was surprised that he wasn't going to ask me *a billion* questions.

The informant's exaggerating quantity in the extreme suggests how she felt about her previous encounters with news media representatives.

A great amount of data would have been lost had the researcher not gone back over audio tapes in an effort to transcribe sections that were incomprehensible to the transcriptionist. In fact, there were 60 more pages of data at the conclusion of the quality assurance process.

### Strategy for Analysis

This study generated more than 30 hours of audiotape and nearly 650 pages of transcribed data. Analysis began with reviewing transcripts, and identifying and coding themes. Initially, the open coding involved looking for concepts suggested by informants directly and through their choice of language. The researcher also coded by using gerunds to describe processes occurring in the narrative itself or in the informants' presentation of their narratives. For example, some activities were coded as "information seeking" or "grieving." This in turn led to the development of sensitizing concepts, or "a starting point in thinking about a class of data of which the social researcher has no definite idea and provides an initial guide to her research" (Denzin, 1997, p. 2). The nature of the data and themes directed the continuing review and analysis of the material. Following open coding, the researcher analyzed the narratives by specifically looking for evidence along the lines of selected themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The researcher did not code transcripts in topical order (i.e., by event) or in the order the data were collected. Instead, the researcher took transcripts from six of the most theoretically relevant informants (those who most closely fit the target informant criteria) and began the coding process with these. The rationale for this was that these particular narratives might yield the most concepts, themes, and codes. These interviews might possibly even represent a point of theoretical saturation (Lindlof, 1995), the point at which review of additional data provides more evidence but few new ideas. Although only six in number, these interviews accounted for almost half of the transcribed data. In reality, the saturation of themes came later. Informants whose relation to a news event was theoretically more distant—e.g., a witness rather than a survivor—brought quite different interpretations to their understandings of the event and its aftermath.

The researcher used a computer infobase software program, Folio Views 4.2, to facilitate data analysis. Most data analysis and organization were done more conventionally, however, using index cards, coded transcripts cut into pieces and organized in dozens of folders, and different colored highlighter pens.

Initially, data analysis for this project was based in the symbolic interaction tradition of qualitative research, examining meaning making in social interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). A primary goal of the analysis was to find ways in which findings can be applied to seek to respect the dignity of individuals in the exemplification process and build on already existing positive outcomes.

#### Limitations of This Study

This study was extremely productive in exploring exemplification in general. This study examined and challenged taken-for-granted assumptions regarding the process

and outcomes for exemplars in high visibility news stories. However, this was only a first step.

One limitation of this study was temporal. In designing this study, the researcher made a conscious decision not to seek out as informants people who were in the initial stages of exemplification. In other words, the researcher ruled out collecting data by tagging along with a news crew and asking people on the scene of the news event what was going on in their mind. Representing this perspective--exemplification as it was unfolding--may have added yet another dimension to this study. This study would be stronger if this perspective could have been represented (although the researcher would make the same methodological decision again).

Another limitation was a lack of variation in the socio-economic status of the informants. Although the researcher did not ask informants directly, all appeared to be some level of middle class. Unanswered, then, is whether people who are less privileged or are exceptionally privileged economically have different experiences of exemplification.

A final limitation was that the researcher was not able to obtain interviews with a particularly intriguing set of exemplars: those exemplars whose images were taken in still or video form and widely disseminated without the exemplars' participation or consent, images which became icons for news events. Several of these situations, such as the firefighter holding the dead child in Oklahoma City, were explicated in an earlier chapter of this dissertation. All of the informants I met with had at some level consented to their media interaction. Those who had not consented likely had a completely different experience. This suggests a direction for future research which, along with other ideas, will be discussed in Chapter 6.

## CHAPTER 4 SITUATING THE RESEARCH

Throughout the first day and night [following a deadly school shooting in Springfield, Oregon in 1998], the media vans and satellite trucks rolled in from across the nation. Before the first hour had passed, a CNN helicopter hovered overhead, transmitting images of our new-found horrific “fame.” Reporters from as far away as Japan, Portugal, England, and Australia took on a larger-than-life presence in our normally quiet community. . . . Before long, a surrealistic scene developed as the street in front of the high school was reduced to a one-lane road, with cars forced to crawl between the constantly humming generators and blazing lights of 20 white satellite vans.

Cathy Paine, crisis response leader  
(Poland & McCormick, 1999, p. 99)

Like much of the research conducted in the post-positivist tradition, this study was done in the field. The researcher traveled to where informants lived and where, in most cases, informants experienced their exemplification. No two informants had the same experience, not even members of the same family. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the basic historical context of the seminal news events (terrorist hostage-taking, the Murrah Building bombing, and the Columbine High School shooting) and to provide some illustrations of the informants’ exemplar experiences.

In many studies, researchers are able to share informants’ stories and protect the informants’ privacy by using pseudonyms and changing a few details in each account. This approach was problematic for this study which was designed to seek out people who had already had details of their life and experience widely publicized by the news media. Many of these exemplars’ faces and stories are well known and readily recognizable—if not throughout America, certainly in their regional areas. In some cases it would be



virtually impossible to shield people's identities unless their accounts were stripped of all meaningful detail—which would defeat the purpose.

The researcher addressed this challenge by creating composite exemplar accounts. In situating the research, the researcher took major aspects and minor details from numerous informants' experiences and brought them together in a few composite examples to convey a sense of the informants' varied experiences.

### Historical Context of Terrorist Hostage Situations

In their book, *No One a Neutral*, Norman Antokol and Mayer Nudell (1990) describe hostage-taking as both a very old phenomenon and a very new one. Famous historical hostages include Julius Caesar who was kidnapped in 81 B.C. by pirates and held until Rome paid a ransom of twelve thousand pieces of gold for his release (Antokol & Nudell, 1990). Up until the 1960s, however, people taken hostage were those with an official relationship to those holding power, either government officials, diplomats, or soldiers. As modern terrorism evolved, the goals of hostage-taking were no longer ransoms or political favors but publicity and intimidation (Antokol & Nudell, 1990).

As the targets of terrorism changed, so, too, did the tactics. Antokol and Nudell (1990) trace modern hostage-taking to Marx's conception of revolution. Guerrillas in Cuba and South America operated with the belief that guerrilla warfare in rural areas could act as a catalyst to accelerate the inevitable synthesis to a communist or socialist form of government. Soon, however, ambushes and hit-and-run military encounters in rural areas gave way to bombings, arson, murder, and hostage-taking in urban centers (Antokol & Nudell, 1990). As one resistance leader put it, "the murder of ten Frenchmen in the desert would go unnoticed, while the killing of a single Frenchman on a busy city street would be covered in the international media" (Antokol & Nudell, 1990, p. 38).

That assessment seems to be true. Not only does the media cover urban terrorism, but it also appears to benefit from that coverage as well. Antokol and Nudell describe the world as a stage, with a news event involving hostages as a drama full of suspense and danger. "The theatrical appeal is irresistible," they write (1990, p. 58). Not only are hostage incidents compelling, but they also deliver ratings. "News reporting is a competitive business, and prolonged, dramatic hostage situations sell newspapers and draw viewers" (Antokol & Nudell, 1990, p. 72).

Although the apparently symbiotic relationship between the news media and terrorists is disquieting (Simon, 1994), the media have an obligation to report the news. More at issue than whether acts of terrorism should be covered is the debate over how this can be accomplished without rewarding terrorists or putting hostages in greater peril.

One of the major critiques of modern press coverage of terrorism is that it serves to popularize the tactics and techniques. Would-be terrorists can learn ways to hijack an aircraft or employ a truck bomb and can observe law enforcement countermeasures so as to learn from the mistakes of others. Antokol and Nudell write that media coverage can give even the most dysfunctional and inarticulate terrorists a platform from which to highlight their cause. Live coverage also can reveal law enforcement tactics in real-time to the terrorists themselves, sometimes with deadly results. This was the case during a 1977 hijacking of a Lufthansa airliner.

During the three days or so that the plane was ordered from stop to stop, the pilot was able to pass information to the authorities without the hijackers being aware of it. Unfortunately, the media got wind of this and broadcast it on commercial radio. The terrorists, who presumably would otherwise have known nothing about it, heard the news on the radio and killed the pilot. Thus the media contributed directly to the murder of a hostage. (Antokol & Nudell, 1990, pp. 78-79)

Reporting also can put hostages at risk in other ways. One is by revealing personal facts that a hostage or prisoner of war attempts to conceal. In her book about

the kidnapping and subsequent execution of her husband, U.S. Marine Corps Colonel William “Rich” Higgins, by the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Robin Higgins wrote of one of her most harrowing concerns. With her husband in the hands of Islamic Fundamentalist fanatics, her greatest fear was the media would discover and publicize her Jewish heritage—without thinking of the implications to her husband’s safety. “It just plain would make great news—it would thicken the plot” (Higgins, 1999, p. 86).

Higgins also described how media speculation and editorializing put her husband, a United Nations peacekeeper, at further risk after his kidnaping. In criticizing the U.S. government for sending an officer with recent access to highly sensitive intelligence to a hazardous area, correspondent Daniel Schorr “was highlighting Rich’s importance to the very people who were just waiting to learn what kind of catch they had” (Higgins, 1999, p. 75). Schorr later apologized to Robin Higgins and agreed he should have been “more circumspect” (p. 76). Other “shoot-from-the-hip journalists” unjustifiably and erroneously portrayed Colonel Higgins as foolhardy or reckless with the implication that he got what was coming to him (p. 74). Robin Higgins felt such baseless reporting could have lessened the resolve of the American public and U.S. and U.N. officials to work for the quick and safe release of her husband (Higgins, 1999).

Two dramatic hostage-taking incidents in the 1970s epitomized the evolution of modern terrorism and the media’s role in bringing such stories to the worldwide audience. On September 5, 1972, commandos from the Black September terrorist group kidnapped 13 Israeli athletes from the Olympic Village in Munich, West Germany. The terrorists demanded the release of 236 Arab prisoners being held in Israel. In *We Interrupt This Broadcast*, Joe Garner writes that media focus switched from the Olympic competitions to the Olympic Village as the world was transfixed by the continuing siege. The standoff ended with a bloody shoot-out at a nearby military airfield. Five terrorists,

nine Israeli athletes, and one West German policeman were killed (Garner, 2000). The incident signaled that in political struggles, any noncombatant could be a target, and not even hallowed, longstanding goodwill institutions like the international Olympics were sacrosanct.

On November 4, 1979, America was stunned when hundreds of Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took more than 60 Americans hostage (Garner, 2000). The Iranian students were protesting continuing American support for the deposed leader, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlevi, who was then being allowed into the United States for cancer treatment. By established tradition, host nations are charged with the safety of credentialed diplomats from other nations (Antokol & Nudell, 1990). In this case, however, the current leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his government endorsed the students' siege and took virtually no action to seek the release of American hostages or to defuse the tense situation. President Jimmy Carter froze Iranian financial assets in the United States and moved a naval battle group to the Indian Ocean within striking distance of Iran (Garner, 2000). Soon after, negotiations began.

Gary Sick (1991), a staff member of the National Security Council under three presidents, wrote that the hostage-taking had "an immense psychological and political impact on the United States and Iran" (p. 16). "Citizens of all ages who normally paid little attention to events outside of the country sat transfixed in front of television sets, breathlessly following each new twist and turn of events" (Sick, 1991, p. 17). Simon described the phenomenon as the public vicariously experiencing the hostages' terrifying ordeal through the media coverage (Simon, 1994). This included seeing the hostages paraded blindfolded in front of the U.S. Embassy as angry crowds shouted "Death to America!" (Simon, 1994). In the absence of substantive developments in the saga, the

news media concentrated on interviewing stateside relatives of the hostages. “Their faces and their plight became as familiar as those of a next-door neighbor” (Sick, 1991, p. 17).

By Thanksgiving, the Iranian dissidents had released women and African American hostages leaving 52 Americans in captivity. Americans rallied behind the hostages and showed support by displaying yellow ribbons (Garner, 2000). Walter Cronkite ended his *CBS Evening News* broadcast each night with the number of days the hostages had been held (Garner, 2000). Such was the interest in this story that ABC created a late-night news program devoted to the hostage crisis (Garner, 2000). *The Iranian Crisis: America Held Hostage* continues today with the same host, journalist Ted Koppel, but a new name: *Nightline*.

Perhaps the darkest moment of the Iran hostage crisis occurred when a U.S. military rescue operation was aborted in the desert about 275 miles from Tehran. Eight U.S. service members were killed and their bodies left behind when a helicopter and a C-130 transport plane collided on the ground in a sandstorm. President Carter went on television and accepted full responsibility for the failed mission, while the American public waited for possible reprisals against the captives (Garner, 2000). Fortunately, none came.

After more than a year of posturing and negotiation, and as Ronald Reagan was being inaugurated as the new President of the United States on January 29, 1981, Iran released the hostages. Their captivity had lasted 444 days, and America had learned a bitter lesson: “For all its military power, the U.S. was subject to events beyond its control” (Garner, 2000, p. 99).

The focus of hostage-taking soon shifted from Iran to Lebanon as foreigners became pawns in the struggle among various Christian and Muslim factions to control the country. Antokol and Nudell describe modern Lebanon as something of a “political

basket case” (Antokol & Nudell, 1990, p. 116), the result of territorial boundaries being decreed by outside powers throughout the last century and ongoing regional struggles for independence, security, or hegemony (Sutherland & Sutherland, 1996). Such was the chaos of Lebanese politics that when a foreigner was abducted, it was often impossible to determine who the kidnappers were and where the hostage might be located. Sometimes several groups claimed responsibility, and sometimes no group did (Antokol & Nudell, 1990). Unlike past hostage-taking incidents, the captivity of hostages in Lebanon was not measured in hours, days, or even months, but often years. Terry Anderson, a journalist for the Associated Press, was held by Islamic Jihad for nearly seven years before being released in December 1991 (Sutherland & Sutherland, 1996).

“They say your life is not a major catastrophe until Dan Rather tells the world about it on the *CBS Evening News*. Now I know that’s true,” wrote Robin Higgins (1999, p. 56). Whether terrorists seized hundreds of hostages as in the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985 or just one person off the street in Beirut as was the case dozens of times throughout the 1980s in Lebanon, the media inevitably sought to cover the human toll in addition to the political implications. Along the way, the families of hostages found that they, too, experienced a unique ordeal.

#### Melinda’s Story

As the saying goes, “Bad news travels fast,” and it often comes early. Melinda remembers getting the phone call from the State Department at about 6:30 a.m. The details were sketchy. Her husband David had been kidnapped in Lebanon. The State Department official advised her to notify the rest of her family as quickly as possible. The national media were already on the story, and this abduction was certain to be the day’s biggest headline.

Melinda didn't break down, and she didn't get emotional. Now was not the time; there was too much to be done. She went down the hall and told her son, Dan, and daughter, Barbara. They took the news calmly, too, and then continued getting ready for school. What else could they do?

Melinda and David's oldest daughter was out-of-state attending college. Melinda called her, and then her parents and David's parents. She had just put the phone down and was watching the news on television when the first reporter found her. She didn't have a plan at that moment, but rather knew instinctively how she would handle it. She thanked the reporter for his concern, but said she had no comment. The reporter was gracious, wished her and the family well, and said goodbye. It was just after 7 a.m.

The anchor on the morning news show led the newscast with a reader about David's kidnapping. Dan and Barbara were just about to leave for school and watched the report with her. It was weird. Hard to believe this was their David the anchor was talking about. The anchor mispronounced their surname, though. Couldn't they get that right?

The phone rang again. It was a former coworker of David's. He had interned under David and was very concerned. He said his prayers were with all of them. Melinda put down the phone, for the first time getting a lump in her throat. It was touching this young man took the time and went to the trouble to call.

The doorbell rang. It was Sally, their next door neighbor and a dear friend for as long as she could remember. "Is it true? What do you need me to do to help?" At that moment, Melinda was ready to send her away. There wasn't anything anyone could do at this point—just wait for more information from the State Department. But the phone rang again—it was another reporter—so Melinda asked her to stay and help her screen phone calls for a while.

By mid-morning, about a dozen reporters had called, and about 20 friends and relatives. No sooner did she or Sally hang up than the phone would ring again. Melinda continued to decline all interviews. She had a headache now, and was getting irritated by the ringing phone. What if her State Department contact had more information and couldn't get through? She went next door to use Sally's phone to see if State knew anything else. All they could tell her this morning was he had been forced into a car along a busy Beirut street as he was walking from a café to his office. No one even knew who had David. It could be anyone: Hezbollah, Amal, Islamic Jihad. New groups seemed to come and go weekly.

When Melinda came back 30 minutes later, Scott Dearborn was sitting on her sofa drinking a cup of coffee. Sally seemed apologetic. "He asked to speak with you," she said. Scott's face was familiar. He was a reporter for the small local daily and usually reported on things like city commission meetings and school board elections. He, too, seemed sheepish.

"Your husband is pretty well known around Tremont," he said. "A lot of people remember him from when he was teaching business out at the college. We wondered if we could talk to you a bit about this ordeal. Maybe even get a photo of your husband?"

Melinda sized him up. He was young, maybe 30, and acted sincere. He wasn't pushy. She took the local paper, and while it was no *Washington Post*, it was a good paper. It reflected the character of Tremont: a small town full of good people.

"We don't know much yet," Melinda said. "I'll talk to you this afternoon, if you care to come back. But on one condition."

Dearborn nodded as he waited for the condition.



“I’ve seen other families in this situation just a-wailing on TV,” she said. “We’re just not that way. If that helps them, then God bless. But we don’t want anyone’s pity and we’re not going to fall apart. We’re going to handle this.”

Dearborn nodded again, and Melinda asked him to come back in about three hours.

Melinda wondered how school was going for Dan and Barbara. She phoned the office and asked the secretary to let them know she would pick them up after school. For the first time that morning, the phone didn’t ring again when she set it down. She got up to flip the channels of the TV, but no sooner had she gotten up than the phone did ring again. More friends and family. More media. She rested for a few minutes and then got into the station wagon to get the kids. She pulled out of the drive, thankful for a few minutes respite from the phone and TV. Sally said she’d cover the phone until 5:30 and then her husband Miles would take over for a few hours.

Two miles down the lane, Melinda stopped at the intersection of the county road they lived on and Main Street. There on the corner, in a church parking lot, were news vans and a few satellite trucks. Deputy Alston tipped his hat to her as she pulled out and she realized those vans and trucks were reporters trying to track her down. Without her even knowing it, the sheriff and his people were making sure she and the kids wouldn’t be bothered. She silently thanked them. When she drove home, she was careful to drive around so she wouldn’t pass the media encampment again. She hoped they’d be gone soon anyway.

At 3 p.m., Scott Dearborn returned. The deputies either trusted him to come on through or Dearborn himself came in the back way—as only a local would know on these poorly marked county roads. Melinda ushered him in past the living room where Sally was still fielding calls and into the kitchen. The counters were covered in Tupperware

containers and Pyrex dishes. Dearborn fidgeted with his long narrow steno pad and tiny microcassette recorder.

“People been sending food over?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how three of us will be able to eat all of this. Would you like a casserole to take home?”

Dearborn laughed, but then grew serious. “There’s an awful lot of reporters who are interested in how you and your family are doing. I saw news crews from as far away as Memphis and Birmingham. You know, they’ll go away faster if you say something. Give them a written statement even.”

Melinda nodded. She’d never dealt with media herself, but had seen it done on TV enough times. “Would you help me write out a statement?” she asked. Dearborn agreed. Soon Dan had popped into the kitchen and was foraging in a basket of macaroons and oatmeal cookies. Melinda turned to him and asked him to get Barbara and join them around the table. Less than 20 minutes later, Dearborn left the house with a statement for the media camp down the hill, a photo of David taken at a recent college reunion, and notes about how a very private family was coping with an international crisis that suddenly hit very close to home.

The crisis was not to be a short one. Months passed, holidays came and went, seasons changed. Melinda and the three kids carried on with school and running a household. Dan graduated from high school. They traveled to Washington, D.C., twice to meet with State Department contacts and other hostage family members. Except for Scott Dearborn whom they saw or talked with a few times each month, the media didn’t call or come by anymore. Well, just a few times. When another hostage was taken or released or the president made a policy statement on the Middle East, she might get a few

calls. Most of the time, Melinda used the answering machine to screen those calls. They had a system that worked.

One day Barbara picked up an early morning call and Melinda watched from the other side of the kitchen as Barbara got a funny look on her face. “I think I’d better let you speak to my Mom,” Barbara said. It was a reporter from Memphis.

“We’ve had a report that David Hughes was executed by his captors in retaliation for Israeli shelling of Southern Lebanon. Do you have a comment?”

Melinda was enraged. “How dare you call and ask that, and ask that of my 16-year-old daughter!” The reporter was adamant that she had the right—no, the responsibility even—to call. The reporter said the public has the right to know. And furthermore, Melinda would do well to provide a reaction to the developments or the reporter would refer the radio station’s lawyers to her.

“What, did she think we were some yokels or something?” Melinda exclaimed, her hands still quivering with her rage. “We live in a small town, but we’re not ignorant!” Melinda remembered one other time when a Birmingham reporter just showed up at their door one evening as they had sat down to eat dinner.

“It was during a severe cold snap we had here,” Melinda explained. “I opened the door, and here’s this woman—a stranger—standing there with a guy with a camera behind her. She said they’d traveled 200 miles to interview us, and would I please let them in? I said absolutely not! She got really pushy. Tried to tell me we *owed* it to them, that the media were the only ones who could help get David released. I finally had to physically push her out the door. I only wished I’d closed the door on her sooner!”

When Melinda’s husband was finally released, things happened quickly. The first hint of a breakthrough came from the media.

“Some guy from CNN called and left a message that there were reports from Damascus that David was on his way home,” Melinda said. “We were glued to CNN for any real proof. Our liaison at the State Department cautioned us not to get our hopes up. We knew that, but we also knew that some of the reporters in Lebanon seemed to have better information than our Embassy staff.”

Scott Dearborn drove up not long after. “It looks like this could really be it,” Dearborn told Melinda. “All the wire services are carrying stories of the release. And if this is it, you know you’re in for another media siege.”

When Melinda tried to imagine David’s release, she always thought about how good it would feel to be reunited and how they would celebrate. In darker moments, she thought about what must be done if David did not survive. He was, after all, being held to make a political statement and his captors didn’t have much to lose. In all those scenarios, though, how she would deal with the media never entered her mind. Perhaps it was time. She asked Scott Dearborn what he would advise. In the course of David’s captivity, Scott had become a family friend and advisor. The articles he wrote for the *Tremont Times* (and which were picked up by a news service) were always factual and never sensational. He never once abused the trust and special access he had with Melinda and the kids. Melinda was surprised when she thought about it—how she had almost from that first day come to rely on his counsel. How Scott managed to be both a trusted friend and an objective reporter. She had never really thought about journalists in that way.

Dearborn volunteered to set up a press conference for Melinda at the regional airport on her way to fly to meet David in Wiesbaden. The airport manager provided the distinguished visitor lounge for the gathering and set up 75 chairs and a dais and podium up front. By the time Melinda arrived for the press conference, about 25 minutes late, the

room was full and already hot from the people and several sets of halogen lights set up on tripods.

“I wasn’t nervous at all, even though I’m such a private person,” Melinda said. “It was almost like I wasn’t even there. I was just euphoric knowing David was safe and on his way home. I couldn’t hardly care less about anything else that was happening. I read a statement and then answered questions for about 20 minutes.”

Melinda continued. “You know, I wasn’t the only one who was euphoric. The reporters seemed, well, it was almost more like we were at a graduation party than a press conference. We were celebrating. The group presented me with a bottle of champagne and a T-shirt that said, ‘I survived the media siege.’ I guess I was expecting more of a *Meet the Press* kind of format.”

Reuniting with her husband at the Air Force hospital in West Germany was a blur. The military kept the media a good distance from the hospital grounds. They did pose for a photo opportunity one morning, but then military and State Department handlers quickly ushered them back into the hospital. After a week of medical check-ups and debriefings, David and Melinda flew to Washington, D.C. aboard an Air Force transport plane. There was another photo opportunity at Andrews Air Force Base, and David took a few minutes to walk over to the reporters and share with them how grateful he was for all the things people had done to remember him in his captivity. Then they slipped away to a hotel in suburban Virginia.

“Life goes on,” Melinda said. “We’re a strong family, and we wanted to get on with things. We didn’t think getting caught up in a media circus was what we wanted. We knew reporters were calling our home trying to track us down and see if David would be on the network morning shows. We just weren’t interested. We rented a station wagon and drove home. People didn’t expect to see a former hostage wearing a flannel

shirt and pumping gas at the Texaco. By the time we arrived in Tremont several days later, we were no longer the news du jour. Except for the *Tremont Times* and a few area TV stations, the media had moved on. They covered David's official Tremont homecoming, and that was that."

### Historical Context of the Oklahoma City Bombing

Just after 9 a.m. on April 19, 1995 a homemade two-ton bomb exploded in a Ryder Rental truck parked just outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (Garner, 2000). One survivor, Ann Shirley Banks, described the moment:

I heard a tremendous explosion. I felt the force of the vacuum, the building shake, the walls and the floors vibrate violently, as I was blown face downward on my desk . . . I looked to the east and I saw the sky. I realized that most of the building was gone and right away I knew it was a bomb. I sat in shock and disbelief. File folders were floating downward like snowflakes. At that same moment, I could hear telephones ringing throughout the building, which left me with an eerie feeling. (Kight, 1998, pp. 30-31)

Many likened the physical destruction of the building to devastation seen in war zones. The face of one side of the building was completely gone, exposing rooms and offices like the back of a doll house (Hoffman, 1998). Dead victims (and parts of victims) were everywhere, often part of surreal and macabre scenes. Dazed and maimed survivors stumbled out of buildings and into the streets (Hoffman, 1998). Those that were able immediately sought to help others while emergency vehicles arrived on scene within minutes (Hansen, 1995). The sense of community and selfless actions by Oklahomans that day and in the following weeks became one positive legacy of the bombing, and is often called "The Oklahoma Standard" (Kight, 1998).

The bomb not only tore at the Murrah Building, but also at neighboring structures like the Regency Towers apartment building, the downtown YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) facility, the federal courthouse, and the Journal Record office

building. Indeed, the force of the blast extended 30 blocks, blowing out windows, damaging more than 400 structures, and nearly blowing over a transit bus filled with passengers (Hoffman, 1998).

Damage to Oklahoma City was estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars (Hoffman, 1998), but the human toll was the highest. More than 500 people were injured (Hoffman, 1998) and 168 people were killed. As difficult as it is to determine precise casualty figures for such a huge attack (e.g., Hoffman reports 169 killed, while Kight reports 168, and Garner reports 167), the true human cost certainly will never be known. Families, survivors, witnesses, and emergency response personnel will likely struggle with life-long posttraumatic outcomes which rarely get written up for news stories.

Jon Hansen, former assistant fire chief for Oklahoma City, wrote a book about the professional and compassionate rescue operations. Of the initial period following the blast he wrote: "I also have to give credit to the local media. Radio, television, and newspaper reporters were all on the scene within minutes. They cooperated fully with our request to move back and keep everybody away from the scene. They also proved to be a valuable resource in getting important information out to the public" (Hansen, 1995, pp. 16-17).

Despite the chaos and horror at the scene, many survivors have written in first-person accounts that they were unaware of the scale of the bombing until they had the opportunity to see news coverage on television. Different survivors used remarkably similar language to describe this aspect as the following examples attest: "Not until I saw the television coverage of the bombing several hours later did I realize the devastation caused by the blast" (Kight, 1998, p. 83). "I did not know how extensive the devastation to the building was until arriving home and seeing the television pictures"

(Kight, 1998, p. 212). “I did not realize how awful the disaster was until I got home and saw the destruction on television” (Kight, 1998, p. 80).

A sense of civic responsibility permeated initial news reporting efforts. “In those early hours, media management took the position that their job was not only to report the story, but to assist in the rescue effort as well. Reporters worked together, sharing information, and soliciting resources as they were needed” (Hansen, 1995, p. 104).

National, regional, and international media moved in quickly and in large numbers to cover the shocking story. “By the second day, we had nicknamed the media area ‘Satellite City,’ as there was almost a two-square-block area of nothing but satellite trucks and live trucks lined up side by side” (Hansen, 1995, p. 106).

Soon after the blast, experts and news media members speculated that foreign terrorists may have carried off the attack. It had been just two years earlier in 1993 that the World Trade Center in New York City had been bombed, allegedly by a militant Islamic group (Garner, 2000). The arrest of Timothy McVeigh for the bombing, an American and a U.S. Army veteran, further compounded the shock of the unprecedented attack in America’s heartland. “It was even more painful to know that a citizen of the United States, an individual who shares the same heritage of this great nation, could do such a thing,” said Arlene Blanchard, a survivor of the blast (Kight, 1998, p. 41).

Blanchard herself was an Army veteran.

Within days, search and rescue efforts gave way to recovery operations. The remains of the Murrah Building were imploded on May 23 (Hansen, 1995). Six days later, the bodies of the final three known victims were recovered (Hansen, 1995). The Murrah Building bombing has been described as the worst act of terrorism on American soil (Hansen, 1995; Kight, 1998).



Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were tried in Denver, Colorado, in 1996. The guilty verdicts and death sentence for McVeigh brought closure for some, but not others. For one thing, many people do not believe that all the bombing conspirators have been brought to justice. Some ordnance experts claim a truck bomb could not have caused the level and pattern of destruction seen at the Murrah Building. Instead, these experts argue, explosives were likely set within the building itself (Hoffman, 1998). Others who have followed the case believe Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents had advance warning of the attack but failed to take any preventive actions (Hoffman, 1998). Questions also surround the mysterious "John Doe #2," a possible accomplice placed at the scene whose identity has never been established (Hoffman, 1998). And in light of all the continuing controversy, many people believe the U.S. government itself is the source of a massive cover-up of the true and complete facts surrounding this case (Hoffman, 1998).

Penny Owen, a reporter for the *Daily Oklahoman*, wrote of the conflict between needing to move on from the tragedy yet being unable to forget. "It is time, some say, to get over the bombing. Tragedies happen. Indeed, the loudest cries come from Oklahomans themselves. We've had enough, they say. Get it off the front page. Isn't it time we move on?" (Kight, 1998, p. 331). It's not that easy, however. "Closure is a dirty word in Oklahoma," Owen continued. "Time and again I've heard there's no such thing; better to suggest a new normal. It's like having your arm chopped off, one widow told me. You can learn to function again, but never as well. For many . . . it will never be over completely" (Kight, 1998, p. 331).

### Jack's Story

“Most people remember feeling or hearing the blast, but I didn’t,” Jack says. “I was in the shower. My answering machine was blinking like crazy. My friends were telling me, ‘Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!’ That’s how I found out. My friends were all calling. I turned on the television, and couldn’t believe what I was seeing.” His voice trails off as he remembers the day his mother was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing.

Jack is in his mid-thirties now, with unruly wavy reddish-brown hair. His style of speech is very animated. He gestures freely, and moves easily between being deadily serious and introspective to relaying a funny story. It comes as no surprise that he works in a profession that requires good people skills and creativity.

He tried to stay at home to wait for a call from his mother, Addie, who had worked for the federal government almost all of her life. He also tried calling hospitals, but the phone circuits were going crazy. Then the waiting got to be too much. He needed to do something. He asked a buddy to cover his phone and then drove up to Oklahoma City. The cops had already established a huge perimeter around the bombing area, and the closest Jack could park was several miles away. He walked quickly toward the site.

“All along the way, the sidewalk was just covered in broken glass from windows that had blown out. I can remember the very distinct crunching sounds my boots made. I still have those boots, and they still have glass embedded in the soles.” Jack also remembers the feeling he got from seeing the shattered windows blocks away yet from the Murrah Building: “Oh, my God!”

When he reached a cordon manned by police officers, Jack could go no further. “I was so frustrated. I just wanted to get to the Murrah Building and search and dig. I

just knew Mom was alive. I *knew* it! And I really did feel she needed my help, my hope and faith in her, for her to hang on until we got her out.”

The first reporter came up to Jack as a grim-faced police officer was explaining Jack should go to the First Christian Church. The disaster and law enforcement agencies had set up a headquarters there for families. He could be the most use to his mother there, the police officer had said.

When the man first spoke to him, Jack didn't know he was a reporter. Jack had assumed he was a family member like himself. The young man listened closely to the conversation between Jack and the officer.

“Then he started asking me questions. I told him I didn't know if my Mom was okay, and that she worked on one of the lower floors. This guy kept cutting me off mid-sentence and asking me other questions. When was the last time I'd spoken to my mother? How many people worked in the building? Can you give me some names?” Jack mimics the reporter's questioning. “He was interrogating me! I was devastated! You know, I hadn't really had time to think this whole thing through. I was discombobulated. I think I only spoke to him because I needed someone to talk to. That son of a bitch! He used me like Kleenex and then just left me there.”

The police officer had stepped back over by that time and put an arm around Jack's shoulder. He helped lead Jack away and get him on his way to the church.

“I don't remember how I got to the church, whether I walked or someone gave me a ride. That part's a blur. But I remember walking in. I was being followed up the walk by a guy with this video camera rig on his shoulder. And the clicking noise! Do you know the sound of all the cameras going off when the president goes somewhere? It was like that. Click, click, flash, whir! Click, click, flash, whir!”

“One of those high profile morning news shows asked me if they could do an interview. I just said, ‘No, no, no, no, no!’ and walked inside. I couldn’t imagine what they wanted to talk to me about. I guess I was in major denial.”

After giving the authorities information about Addie—a physical description, where she worked, what she was wearing that morning—there wasn’t much for Jack or other family members to do except wait and watch one of the televisions that had been set up inside the complex.

“I saw the pictures, but I still knew Mom was going to be fine,” Jack says. “I knew through my sheer force of will that I could make things come out okay. Hope was the only thing keeping me going at that moment.”

Jack stayed at the First Christian Church day and night, leaving only when he had to for a change of clothes or to collect dental records or samples of his mother’s fingerprints. The crisis center was well equipped for the families. There were phone banks, hot meals, and other family members to lean on. The medical examiner briefed families and answered their questions every morning and afternoon before updating the press, who weren’t otherwise allowed in. And periodically, family members were taken aside and told that the medical examiner needed to see them upstairs. No one looked forward to that. Family members watched the TV for any additional information reporters could provide as the interminable waiting continued.

“You know what the very worst part of the news coverage was?” Jack asks. “It was sensationalizing a story that didn’t need it. You can’t imagine how painful it was for us family members when the media toyed with our hope or covered story angles that had no business being covered.”

Jack's voice gets louder and anger spills through the words. "First, when it got cold that first night, reporters said hypothermia would probably kill any trapped survivors. Then when it rained, reporters brought out experts who said the water may help survivors hang on for two or three more days. They'd do that. Raise our hopes one minute, and annihilate our hopes the next. And then there were the *really* awful and unnecessary stories. It was anguishing enough losing our loved ones. We didn't need stories about people being vaporized by the blast, or body parts that didn't fit anybody, or surgeons coming up from Norman with amputation equipment. We just didn't need that. No one did."

As the days passed, Jack acceded to some requests from the press for interviews about his mother and for information for articles profiling the victims. The interviews usually came about after he had talked to the reporter a time or two to get a sense of where he or she wanted to go with the story. Some of the reporters seemed more genuine than others.

"It was really cathartic in a way to tell my story, and to tell about Mom. I wanted everyone to know what a great lady she was and wanted everyone to root for her like I was. So I just talked about how great she was, and she's coming home. And everyone needed to know how much this bombing hurt and how much I missed my Mom." But the media even got the easy stuff wrong.

"How could they misspell my Mom's name?" he exclaims. It's 'Addie,' not 'Maddie.' How hard is that? And I told them her hobbies were gardening and raising fish in an aquarium, and they printed that she liked raising a garden and *fishing*. Every time I tried to get something corrected, they either ignored me or made it worse. And

then my sister got mad with me because she thought I wasn't giving the newspaper the right information, and I was making it sound like I was Mom's only family."

Jack's mother was one of the last victims found before the Murrah building was imploded. It had been a long wait. Even until his own private meeting with the coroner, Jack had held out hope for an improbable happy ending.

By now, Jack seems almost apologetic. "I guess I don't have much good to say about the media," he says. "In some ways, I know they're an easy target. I know it all sounds kind of petty, but it piles up. And I'm so angry about the bombing and losing my Mom because some fanatics hate the government and don't see that the government is just people. Good people like my Mom. It's easy to dwell on how the media made everything worse."

The researcher says if the shoe fits, the media should wear it. Jack thinks on this a bit, and then continues.

"In fairness, the media weren't all bad. You could tell from a lot of the TV coverage that most of the reporters were just as broken up about the bombing as the rest of us. Even the Tom Brokaws and Ted Koppels. And most of the reporters that asked me for interviews were nice enough, even if I turned them down. You just tend to remember the jerks. Like the reporters that snuck into the crisis center with the families. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth."

### Historical Context of the Columbine High School Shooting

Guns have been a fact of life in America since European settlers arrived. The use of guns by children to hurt or kill other children, however, is a disturbing modern phenomenon. School shootings in the late 1990s in particular shocked Americans and set

off debates on everything from gun control and values to violent video games and rock music.

The list of towns where “it couldn’t happen here”—but did—seems to grow longer each year. In Pearl, Mississippi, on October 1, 1997, 16-year-old Luke Woodham killed his mother at home, and then went to his school and opened fire, killing three classmates and injuring seven others (Begley, 1999). Two months later, 14-year-old Michael Carneal in West Paducah, Kentucky, shot and killed three students who were taking part in a prayer meeting at his high school (Begley, 1999). Carneal’s father was a lawyer and his sister, Kelly, was Heath High School’s valedictorian. The Carneal family did not seem to fit the profile for dysfunctional families that breed violence and rage (Belkin, 1999). A few months later, on March 24, 1998, Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden put Jonesboro, Arkansas on the school violence map with their attack at Westside Middle School (Freedom Forum, 1998). Kip Kinkel killed his parents and then shot 24 students at his high school in Springfield, Oregon, on May 21, 1998 (Begley, 1999). The scope of the attacks seemed to be getting larger, but the public nonetheless was unprepared for the killing spree of 18-year-old Eric Harris and 17-year-old Dylan Klebold who murdered 12 students and a teacher before turning their guns on themselves on April 20, 1999.

The aftermath of all these shooting incidents is inevitably the question of why. Klebold and Harris anticipated this and left behind five videotapes recorded in the weeks before their rampage (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). They talk about their hatred of minorities, enemies who abused them, friends who did not do enough to stand up for them, athletes who taunted them, and family failings (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). Klebold says in the tapes, “I hope we kill 250 of you!” (Gibbs & Roche, 1999, p. 42). The tapes reveal Harris and

Klebold's motives went beyond revenge, however. They expected their carnage to earn them immortality, with directors like Spielberg and Tarantino fighting over the rights to bring their story to the screen (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

Harris and Klebold had set bombs in and around Columbine High School that morning. Investigators believe their plan was to create panic with the detonation of explosive devices in the crowded school cafeteria, and then mow students down as they fled the building. Harris and Klebold had even set explosive devices in the parking lot in order to kill or hurt as many students and emergency response force members as possible (Garner, 2000).

Fortunately, Harris and Klebold's bombs failed to explode. Instead, Harris and Klebold were forced to improvise. They strapped on their guns and ammunition and opened fire as they walked up to the school (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). As Harris and Klebold entered the cafeteria and then went upstairs, firing their weapons as they went, terrified students hid in classrooms, closets, and even in the ceiling. Dozens of others sprinted out of the building and headed to nearby Clement Park for safety ("Chronology," 1999). About an hour after the melee began, SWAT team members began a methodical evacuation of students from their hiding places within the school (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). News helicopters broadcast the unforgettable images of students fleeing the high school, hands clasped behind their heads to show they were unarmed, running past a body on a sidewalk (Elliott, 2000). By that time, Harris and Klebold had already killed themselves (Gibbs & Roche, 1999).

The image of the dead student on the sidewalk was especially painful to his family. A photo of the scene ran in the following day's *Denver Rocky Mountain News* with the family discovering it when thumbing through photos hoping to see their son



among the survivors (Scelfo, 1999). “There are no words to describe it,” said Sue Petrone, mother of slain student Danny Rohrbough. “I understand them using the picture, because it’s the only one that really shows the horror of the whole thing, but they should have waited a few days until they contacted us” (Scelfo, 1999, paragraph 23). Petrone described how her pain continued at the one-year anniversary of the shooting: “When you’re sitting in your living room and watching television, and I know this from personal experience, and you see flashes of Columbine, and for me, people running past my lifeless son on the sidewalk, it can be very traumatizing” (Elliott, 2000, paragraph 19).

Columbine was yet another seminal news event that ignited a debate about what constitutes appropriate news coverage. The issue was especially relevant as Columbine students went back to the school the September following the attack and at the one-year anniversary. A local mental health professional spoke of the effect: “Many people, especially those most directly impacted, feel very traumatized by some of the things they have read, some of the things they have seen and the continual barrage, as they feel it, of the media” (Elliott, 2000, paragraph 15). In counterpoint, a Denver psychologist said, “‘People say, would you stop talking about Columbine?’ and I think, ‘No, we need to keep talking about Columbine. It’s important that we look at how deep the wounds go’” (Hewitt & Smolowe, 1999, pp. 59-60). There appear to be no easy answers.

There are other troubling issues concerning the effect of the coverage of violence on society. In a *Newsweek* poll several months after the Columbine shooting, 72 percent of respondents said they believed the coverage made children and their parents feel more at risk than they really were regarding school violence. An even greater percentage, 88 percent, said they believed the media coverage encouraged copycat killings (Turner,

1999). Scott Johnson, father of one of the boys involved in the Jonesboro shooting, wrote:

I worry about the way the media cover tragedies like these. I can't help but wonder if the nonstop pictures and commentary and endless scrutiny somehow give desperate kids in need of attention a way to get it. These kids turn themselves into martyrs hoping to get on the evening news. (Johnson, 1999, p. 38)

The effects of seeing violence or experiencing it vicariously through media is a major topic of communications research in the area of cultivation theory (Felson, 1996). Some researchers believe programming with violent content (which could include news programs) can serve as a catalyst to stimulate people are emotionally unstable to commit violent acts. Other research is exploring whether repeated exposure to violence in media desensitizes people to violence in real life. Proponents of this view, for example, might argue that the more people are exposed to stories of student killing sprees, the more normative that violent behavior becomes. In other words, behavior that once might have been unthinkable becomes more acceptable after repeated exposure. Although not all scholars embrace cultivation theory, Felson (1996) in his meta-analysis of mass media and violent behavior studies finds it "reasonable to believe that the media directs viewers' attention to novel forms of violent behavior they might not otherwise consider" (p. 124).

The Columbine High School shooting may stand out from previous incidents of school violence for a number of reasons. First, the sheer firepower the two shooters amassed and employed: pipe bombs and propane tanks rigged to blow up, sawed-off shotguns, and semi-automatic pistols. Second was the number of victims. In addition to the 12 students and teacher who were killed, 23 students were transported to area hospitals and 200 more received treatment from paramedics on the scene (Schrader,

1999). Many of the wounded were left with permanent physical injuries. As with the Oklahoma City bombing, the psychological toll has likely been far greater, although it will never be adequately defined. And finally, Columbine was covered live: the kids running from the building, SWAT team members going to the aid of student Patrick Ireland, tearful reunions, and young faces full of shock and grief. “And then there was Columbine,” wrote Lisa Belkin, “the massacre that, because it played out on television, seems to have crystallized all the others” (Belkin, 1999, p. 62). That’s not to say other stories of children shooting children might not soon eclipse Columbine. In Mount Morris Township, Michigan, in February 2000, a 6-year-old boy pulled a gun from his pants and shot a 6-year-old classmate to death in front of classmates and teachers (Goldberg, 2000).

#### Kathleen’s Story

“There’s nothing more important than understanding why Columbine occurred,” Kathleen says. “It’s a burden, it’s a responsibility, but it’s also an opportunity.”

She is sitting in her living room, drinking coffee first thing in the morning. She has three children. Two of them were at Columbine that day, but eventually got out physically unharmed. The third, a daughter six years younger, was at a different school. She’s emphatic about how April 20, 1999 changed their lives forever.

“We were so naïve. I mean, look at us! We’d never been involved with the media before. Why would we be?”

She goes back to the events of that day. Like so many others, she is used to telling her story. She easily jumps back in time.

“It was April, and unusually warm. I was free that morning, and was out in the backyard starting to clean out the beds. I heard some popping noises. ‘Sounds like

gunfire!’ I thought, but then you know how you talk to yourself sometimes? ‘Nah! Couldn’t be! Not in South Jefferson County!’ But I kept hearing the pops.”

“A few minutes later, sirens were coming from everywhere, and there was a helicopter circling near the school.” Kathleen throws an arm up over her shoulder and motions in the direction of Columbine. Columbine High School is very close, just one hill over.

“The landscape around here forms a natural amphitheater, and the sirens and helicopter—the noises were just echoing. That’s when I started to get this really bad feeling in my gut.”

It is not hard to imagine the chilling effect of the echoing sirens and the beating of the helicopter blades. Kathleen drums the fingers of one hand in succession on the table to give an idea of what a low-flying helicopter sounds like. Then she drums the fingers of her other hand the same way. It sounds very ominous.

“I was glad it was before noon, because whatever was going on down the street, I felt like Dana and Jeff would be safe inside the school. What a shock!”

Kathleen recounts how she fought the urge to get in her car to see what was going on, and finally settled for turning on the TV. Every local channel had interrupted regular programming. Underneath the “Breaking News” banners were pictures of Columbine High School! She called her husband, Barry, and was lucky to reach him at his office a few miles away. Panicked, but still not quite believing this could be happening in their community, Kathleen decided to wait at home while husband Barry would go to the school. As the hours went by, Kathleen waited for phone calls and flipped the television channels hoping to catch a glimpse of her 16-year-old daughter or 17-year-old son.

“Every now and then I thought I recognized one of their friends or a neighbor’s child,” Kathleen said. “It broke my heart seeing these kids and hearing them. One student was hysterical, describing how cruel Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were. The girl was sobbing and talking about dead students, and the reporter cut her off in mid-sentence. I think they were trying not to panic families, but it was too late for that. And I was glued to the TV. It was a lifeline, the only way I had for getting any news about what was happening.”

Her son finally walked home. He had actually escaped the school early on, but had ended up at a strip mall north of the high school and had a hard time getting around the sealed off school to get home. Barry waited at Leawood Elementary, the place police were reuniting evacuated students with their families. It wasn’t until late afternoon—in one of the last bus trips—that Barry finally saw Dana.

“It was heart-breaking. She looked awful. Her face was just streaked with tears. She just cried uncontrollably when her dad found her. She had been trapped with a small group of others for hours and was certain she would die.”

“It was at Leawood that we had our first media experience. Barry thought most of the reporters there were pretty respectful—kept their distance. One lady came up to Barry and Dana and asked Dana if she would be willing to share her story in an interview. Dana said, ‘No, I want to go home and see the rest of my family.’ The woman, she was a booker or producer for CNN, said she understood, but gave Dana her card. She said to please come by and see them over at Clement Park if she “felt up to it.”

“When you come close to losing a child, you really understand what’s important in life,” said Kathleen. “Having Barry and all the kids home, safe—that meant everything to me. If I’d had my way that night and for the next several days, I would

have kept everyone right there with me where I could look at them and hug them. But Jeff wanted to be with his friends. Jeff left the house with a couple of boys he plays basketball with, and they went from house to house of their friends trying to account for everyone they knew.”

“Dana had it in her mind to go up to Clement Park and give an interview. She already knew a lot of students hadn’t made it. The sheriff even said at one point that 25 kids may be dead. She felt she had a responsibility to the students who couldn’t speak for themselves anymore. So Barry went up there with her.”

Most media outlets had set up operations of some sort at Clement Park. The urban park was adjacent to and looked down on the school, and was a natural gathering place for Columbine students and community members. Dana found as soon as she told her story to one reporter, a representative from another was waiting to ask her to do the same for them. She gave interviews for nearly three hours, until finally she told her dad she was too exhausted to answer one more question. “We were very proud of her. Barry told her to just turn around and leave. She’d done her duty. There were plenty of other Columbine students around, and she should just go home now.”

What had they thought of the media at Clement Park and their coverage?

“It was crazy. I later saw just how much media were there. It was overwhelming. Barry and Dana both said most of the media were so nice, and concerned about how Dana and her family were doing.” Kathleen smiles briefly remembering an incident.

“Well, there was a moment there when it seemed like the *Today Show* had created a hostage situation. Dana had started to go off with a local reporter for a quick interview when a *Today Show* staffer ran up. ‘Hey, you can’t take her! She’s ours!’ Barry told them, ‘No, she’s my daughter, and she comes and goes when she wants to. If you want

to talk to her again, we'll be back. But we're going over here now.' Some of the reporters thought they should have an exclusive or something."

"That was an exception. At Clement Park and even on the TV, you could see that many of the reporters were as shaken up as the rest of us. Dana had several reporters come up and just ask how she was. Never took a pen out or anything. They were just concerned. One photographer came over and asked if he could just give her a hug. I'd never thought of the media as people before, and now I know that they have to cover the horrible stories just as they do all of the others."

Kathleen said that it was just a matter of days before students tired of the media attention and parents began keeping the press away from their children. Their family continued to get calls, mainly because Dana and her parents were still willing to allow it. Why, the researcher asked, were they still willing to share their time with the press?

"Our son, Jeff, wasn't into that. He maybe talked with a half dozen reporters the whole time. I think the place he needed to be was with his friends. I know they talked a lot. I think that was how a lot of boys handled the whole thing. Dana, as I said, felt that responsibility—kind of mature for her years. She wanted people to know that Columbine was a great school, and that the kids who were hurt or killed were good young people, the best. And she asked, 'Hey, if I don't tell what happened here, the reporters will just find someone else who may not have really even been there.' What could we say? She wanted to get the story right. Because it seems like even then there were a lot of kids who just seemed entranced with the excitement and glamour of the TV cameras. For some, it was a kick to be on TV. I don't think the tragedy had really even hit them yet. That's sad, too, when you think about it, you know? You knew that when it finally hit them, they were going to come down hard."

Reporters also asked Barry and Kathleen for interviews. “We had never done interviews before, never done anything with reporters, and suddenly here we were talking to Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric. They were some of the nicest people. They couldn’t have been nicer. You see, we were as shocked about Columbine as anyone, and we knew it was important to understand what had happened. As parents, we wanted the truth. And we thought the only way as a community to heal from this was to learn from this. That’s why we say Columbine was a burden, a real tragedy, but also a responsibility now for us, and an opportunity to learn from and use to prevent another child from shooting up a school.”

“For a while there, we had media in our house and all over our yard for days. We wanted to know how those boys could have slipped through the cracks. How could everyone have missed the warning signs? And you know what? We found out quickly that when things go bad, a lot of people want to cover up the truth. Because it makes them look bad. But we need the truth! We have to have the truth! Really! I don’t know what truth it is that they don’t think we can handle! And that’s why when people ask me if the media were intrusive, I say, ‘Absolutely not!’ We needed the media to investigate and ask unpleasant questions and put officials on the spot. How else would we have learned how Columbine could have happened? So many people just want to hide things.”

Kathleen says she and her family learned some lessons from working with the media. “Many people around here hate the media. They blame them for this, and they’re just mean to the reporters. It makes me ashamed. What are we teaching our kids? To look down on people who are just doing their jobs? Someone has to do it!”

“And if I could do it all over again, you know what? I’d have talked to the media sooner, and I would have talked to more of them! I can’t tell you how supportive they



have been of me and my family. And some people didn't like what we had to say, but we also got a lot of support from people who feel like we do. So we don't feel like we were alone. The support from total strangers, from people in France and Japan even, was touching. It helped us. It really helped us."

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Writers often don't know much about the world they're trying to describe, but they don't necessarily need to. They just need to ask a lot of questions. And then they need to step back and let the story speak for itself.

Sebastian Junger (1997, p. 299)

One of the strengths of this study was the rich diversity among the informants and the stories they shared. This characteristic was also one of the greatest challenges: making sense of data that seemingly pointed in many different directions. The research questions were designed to explore the issues of privacy, process, and meaning for exemplars. Informants shared insight on these themes, but also introduced others. The purpose of the first part of this chapter is to explore in a chronological framework how exemplification unfolded for the informants and to represent the variety of their experiences. The latter part of this chapter will return to the focus on the concepts of privacy, the exemplification process, and the meanings and outcomes informants attributed to their experience.

#### The Roles of Media When All Hell Breaks Loose

Media plays an important, sometimes even a central, role for individuals and families in the midst of challenge. Even before reporters physically come knocking or calling, the news media is a presence, usually in the form of breaking news coverage.

### Awareness

In situations involving one person or one family, notification or awareness of the crisis tended to emanate from the expected channels, for example, a call from a State Department official. In the large-scale news scenarios like Columbine and the Alfred P. Murrah Building bombing, awareness tended to come from sensory perceptions or from phone calls of friends and acquaintances who had learned of the event.

Some heard the actual sounds of the event.

I was at home, working in the garage out back, and I heard gunshots, like a shotgun. . . . And then I'm hearing boom! Boom! Sounds of gunfire, and there's sirens just from every direction and maybe more helicopters and I'm thinking, this is only maybe 15 minutes [after Columbine shooting began]. I'm putting down my tools and thinking something's going on. I'm going to take a break from my job here and I'm going to see. (C1-3-13)<sup>1</sup>

Others felt the occurrence.

It shook the house! And we're nine miles? Seven miles away from it? And it did shake! I was working at my computer, and the patio doors, which I was like two feet from, shook. We thought, and the neighbors went out, and we thought it was a plane from Tinker [Air Force Base]. Obviously, they're not supposed to fly over the city and break the sound barrier and stuff, but, you know, every once in a while it happens. And so that's what we thought had happened. (O6-4-9)

More commonly, people were alerted to events from friends or coworkers calling.

My son was at that point a senior at Bear Creek High School, a neighboring school, called me on my cell phone and said, "Did you HEAR that they are shooting up Columbine?" and we left. Just left the restaurant. (C6-4-8)

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from interview transcripts begin with a letter indicating the news event to which the exemplar was associated. "C" represents the Columbine shooting, "H" represents terrorist hostage incidents, and "O" represents informants associated with the Oklahoma City bombing. The three alphanumeric sets represent the informant, page of the transcript, and the first line from which text was extracted. For example, C8-12-4 references the eighth interview with a Columbine informant, and the twelfth page and fourth line of the transcript.

I'd just gotten out of the shower and I saw the answering machine blinking, and my friends all telling me, "Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV! Turn on the TV!" (O3-3-9)

One signification of the electronic age is some people heard about events in their own backyard from out-of-state friends and relatives first (C8-1-19), bringing new relevance to the expression "bad news travels fast."

### Information Source

Informants who were on scene or very close often tended to head to the location of the event. For most, the first thought and inclination was to turn to the media. One informant described the media at that time as a lifeline:

I came back in the house and turned on the TV. And at that point, they thought it was the courthouse, which is across the street, and then they found out it was the Federal Building, and of course, I just sat there. And to me, the media was a lifeline, because that was the only way I was going to find anything out. (O6-4-14)

For some, the media provided a window on what was going on at the crisis scene, allowing them to remain by the home phone—the manner in which their loved ones or officials might provide word.

People would come and I would be staring at the TV and they'd ask me if they could help, and I'd say, "Go to this hospital. Go to that corner and go to that place, there!" you know. And I didn't take my eyes off the television until we had to leave to go, the next day. (O3-4-20)

In the words of another informant: "At that point, anything that I could hang my hat on was information. Whether it was good, bad, or indifferent or anything else. I just wanted information! I just wanted to know something" (O6-7-7). From having watched how disasters had been covered through the years, she expected that the initial information would only be about 45 percent correct. "Whenever something like that happens, usually about the first 24 hours I take everything with a grain of salt, knowing

they're doing their job [the reporters], but they really don't know at that point in time" (O6-7-12). A younger informant, a Columbine High School student who survived the shooting but was trapped in the building for many hours, had a similar evaluation of the media's reporting.

I never really liked watching TV. . . . But now that like everything they said, that I think, as far as I saw, 45 percent of it was true, and all the rest of it was blown out of proportion. I don't even watch anymore. It's pointless. (C2-10-16)

Other informants were not as free to forgive reporters' speculation and inaccuracies. One woman described her experience of the initial coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing:

It was so sensationalized. And it's, it's so hard—you know how they do on the evening news? They give these blurbs and they make it sound like you have *got* to hear this news story! . . . They have got to make you watch. They have to have their ratings, and I understand that. But to say, like that first day reporting, 'Doctors from Norman are riding into town with amputation equipment.' There was no *need* to say that! Anybody who imagines that building falling on all those people would imagine that people are going to lose limbs. There's no need to say that. But it made people go, 'Oh my gosh!' and stay and watch. . . . And they have experts on . . . and he says that people can only live so long under a building, and if there's rain, they can live for so long, and if there's not—all the different variables. And talk about it for an hour! And then the next day change! . . . That was *so* unnecessary, and hurtful, I think, to everyone. (O3-19-1)

A Columbine student echoed the theme of sensationalizing the story for ratings:

They were just repeating certain things that would make more people want to watch it . . . and some of the slogans they would use to, you know, "Tomorrow we'll have the Special Massacre of Columbine" or the "Deathfest of Columbine" or whatever it was. . . . I just thought, "It's good for ratings, I suppose." (C5-10-7)

News coverage often painted a shocking and grim scene:

By then, we knew it was huge. . . . I'm watching a helicopter picture on television—you talk about the media having an impact! Here's a, here's a corpse by the fire truck, lying on the sidewalk, children running past it. Live shots! And nobody's confirmed anybody's dead. . . . It was that serious, that nobody wanted to risk their life even to move a dead body out of the way. (C1-9-1)

Of course, informants reported a great deal of misinformation during the early stages of crisis. Some resulted from poor reporting while some was a combination of miscommunication or misinterpretation. One Columbine parent received what should have been a reassuring phone message from his daughter. “‘Dad, I’m okay, I’m in the library.’ Then I go back to the TV and the library is not where you want to be” (C1-4-19). The Columbine High School library is where the most students were killed. The informant’s daughter had not specified that she was at the Jefferson County Library, about half a mile from the high school, but neither was she aware at the time of what was being said in news reports that gave her father so much cause to worry.

Media coverage confirmed the worst of fears for some family members, as was the case with Sue Petrone who knew for sure her son had been killed at Columbine by seeing news photos of his lifeless body (the scene described earlier in which students were running past a corpse). Some coverage offered hope or good news to some, as when people recognized friends in photos or video of survivors. Other coverage had the power to raise and crush hopes both at the same time. One Oklahoma City bombing family member was thrilled to see a co-worker of her missing father emerge from the building unharmed. She felt certain her father would be rescued next. Reporters on the scene immediately interviewed the survivor.

He was not the right guy to put on TV right then because he was saying, “Everybody’s dead, everybody’s dead. Nobody could live through that.” . . . I didn’t see how anybody lived through it! But that’s not what everybody needed to hear right then. So that was really hard. (O3-5-8)

Her father had been killed in the explosion.

While news coverage brought home the ultimate bad news for some, it also provided other families with joyous news: that their loved one had survived or was all right. One Oklahoma City family member described their experience:

The ironic thing was we were watching one station, another station was giving a feed to CNN. . . . So we found out that he was okay from our daughter-in-law who lives in New York, who saw him on CNN, called us, and said, "Dad's okay. We just saw him coming down the ladder." . . . And our daughter-in-law who lived in Texas got through about two minutes later and said, "Dad's okay," so we found out from two out-of-state sources. . . . And so that's how we found out that he was okay. (O6-4-18).

It is a novel concept that people thousands of miles from an event can stay informed with the current situation and even do something to help their friends or family in crisis. People distantly removed can still monitor news coverage—sifting facts from speculation and watching the images—and obtain useful information. As one Oklahoma City family member put it, "That's the good thing about the media. Families are so divided by miles nowadays that they were all able to see what was going on" (O6-6-6). This contrasts to past times when people who were not on the scene often may have felt helpless and frustrated because there was little tangible support they could offer beyond prayer and condolences. In an interesting extension to the example cited above, the informant reported that after her family learned that their loved one was safe, instead of her family notifying friends and relatives of the status, the friends and relatives *notified them* (O5-5-21). In a sense, the media relieved the family of a task, albeit a happy one, at what was a trying and emotional time.

The informants who were participants and survivors of the news event had a quite different experience of the media in early stages of the ordeal. One student, while waiting to be evacuated from inside Columbine was able to see a few minutes of the live television coverage with the sound on mute. At the time, law enforcement officials

mistakenly believed up to 25 people may have been killed, and a news graphic flashed that information on the screen. The student felt bad worrying about the effect on her mother of seeing that coverage. "I was hoping that, oh, no, my mom's going to know. There's no way to conceal it and everything" (C2-4-9). She went on to describe how she herself felt seeing her school on television:

It was so creepy, 'cause like, you know, you see things on TV that are big stories, and it's like, "Wow!" Those things kinda happen, and it doesn't seem real to you because it happens so far away. . . . I mean, Oklahoma [the bombing] still didn't seem real to me. Still doesn't. But this coverage is like, I'm *in* there! I mean, I'm looking pretty much at myself, and that's kind of creepy. (C2-5-9).

The media responded almost as quickly as emergency response personnel. Some informants expressed surprise at the speed and size of the media response. One informant who managed to escape Columbine relatively quickly said,

Yeah, we got outside and once we got out to Clement Park . . . we saw a bunch of police cars and like one or two news vans. Mainly, we just saw the news vans and I remember we were joking about how they got here before the police it seemed like. (C5-3-14)

Another Columbine student reported the same scene: "There was already media there by the time I got there, and I got there like 10 minutes after it happened. . . . But there was already our local news" (C4-2-11). She continued that at that point, they were not even sure what the reporters were there to cover. She had gotten out of the building so quickly, it was not even clear to her yet the extent of what was occurring down the hill (C4-2-16). Another Columbine informant, a parent, noted the irony: "So that was kind of mind-boggling that AOL [America Online], that the Internet, had the story faster than a lot of us who lived in the community" (C8-11-11).

Several informants who were survivors or family members on the scene at Oklahoma City or Littleton related anecdotes about how reporters and news producers



used media resources to help them get information on the status of significant others.

The informants' stories reveal another aspect of media presence: as a resource for information-seeking amidst the chaos of a major mass casualty scene. An informant who lost two family members in the Oklahoma City bombing described her experience:

I remember Robin Marsh, and I think she's with Channel 9 now, and I remember talking to her because she was trying to help us. She wanted to know what they were wearing, and, you know, things like that, so we could try to find out *if* they were alive and *if* they were at a hospital . . . She was helping us! . . . She wasn't asking us anything personal, just—you know, she *was* trying to help us!  
(O7-13-2)

A student survivor of Columbine had a similar story. After rating the performance of the media at Clement Park as about a "B" (because she and her friends were not able to just hug without being photographed and asked for their identities), she said the media was annoying, but considerate, too.

When they talked to us, they treated us like human beings, you know, that we were real people, that we're really going through this. They were very nice and asked if there was anything they could do. Like one lady, I think it was for CNN. . . . But she was like, "Well, is there anything I can do?" and I told her, I was like, "I don't know what happened to Coach Sanders, because I saw him and then I didn't see him anymore." And she spent like two hours on the phone, trying to get a hold of somebody who knew something. (C4-6-22)

### Constructing the Work to Be Done

Contrary to entertainment media stereotypes of old in which family members are sedated and sent to bed upon learning bad news, none of the informants in this study had the luxury of succumbing completely to shock and withdrawing from the situation. There was work to be done, and they knew it. The media and media interest in the event and people drove many families' agendas in the early hours and days following the event. Priorities centered around taking care of family needs and developing plans or strategies for coping with the event.

### Family First

One informant walked out of a meeting in which she had learned minutes earlier that her husband had been taken hostage in Lebanon to find media waiting for her in the hallway. She provided a photograph of her husband for the press to use and committed to a media opportunity later in the day. She was deliberate in her actions. Giving the reporters something to work with bought her the time she needed to focus on family needs.

I felt like the second task [after dealing with the immediate challenge of the media in the hallway] was to figure out who I had to notify and to get to them as quickly and as appropriately as possible. And the first one was [her stepdaughter]. She was in high school . . . and I felt that it was quite clear that the news was gonna be out there fast. And at the time I didn't know how big it was going to be, but I guess I knew it was big. (H5-12-11)

She sent someone to bring her stepdaughter to her to ensure the teenager would not be alone when she learned of the crisis and would not hear it from the news first (H5-13-1).

Another informant, a Columbine parent, met up with his daughter at a nearby county public library after she fled the high school. Reporters immediately approached them for an interview. They declined then, although later they would provide literally dozens of local, national, and international interviews.

And as we met, there were people handing us cards from the media, and one of them was a reporter that wanted her [the daughter] as soon as possible. I said, "Look, I have to take her . . . over to where her mom is and let her know that [her daughter] is safe." (C1-5-5)

A Denver-based journalist whose niece was a Columbine student was one of the first reporters to arrive on the scene. Her initial actions were calling her sister-in-law to see if her niece had escaped and putting in calls to her bureau chief in California

(C6-4-18). After learning her niece had gotten out of the building relatively quickly, she was free to concentrate on her professional responsibilities.

For the families of Columbine students who were seriously injured in the attack, decisions about whether or how to interact with the media were particularly important. One family deliberately and early on decided they did not want media attention and did not want to make themselves available to reporters. With the assistance of hospital staff who advised them on how they could protect their privacy while their son was a patient, this family found they were free to focus on the needs and well-being of their son. They contrasted their experience to that of families who chose to be more public, and they are confident they made the best decision for themselves.

Other families, they were always on the phone talking to media people and along with dealing with the tragedy of their child, they had to deal with the media also. And we didn't have to. We could just concentrate on [our son] and our own friends and family. (C10-19-3)

Even those people who suddenly found themselves held hostage overseas took certain actions in relation to the media for the express purpose of looking out for or reaching their family members. Captors often make videotapes of their hostages which they disseminate to media outlets for propaganda purposes. These tapes provide proof that they are indeed holding a captive and almost always generate renewed media coverage of their terrorist act and political cause. Sometimes, hostages have the choice of whether or not to participate in making a tape or to participate in an activity that will be filmed. One informant who had been a hostage took part in such videos several times, each time with a specific purpose. He and his wife described those exchanges:

H3: I wasn't gonna say anything that was gonna embarrass anybody. And I said what I wanted to say, not what anybody else wanted me to say . . . but the [Easter] one was yes, the family needs to know that, to see me.

- H4: Know that he was getting fed and he's not down to skin and bones.
- H3: And so I did. A very neutral statement, my love, and congratulate [my daughter] on being admitted to Syracuse University.
- H4: Oh see, that way I knew he was getting my letters.  
(H3-36-14)

The significance of a later videotape appearance was even more subtle.

- H3: Yeah, in the third, I asked [my son] to get the rose bed fixed.
- Researcher: You asked [your son] to get the what fixed?
- H3: The rose bed established. . . .
- Researcher: Was there a specific thing with that rose garden comment or you were just trying to get some personal stuff to your kids?
- H3: I'd be home. I'd be home.
- H4: Yeah. (H3-37-8)

### Making a Plan

The first and foremost concern of informants was generally about their family and loved ones. One informant summed it up this way: "I don't think I thought of my needs. . . . My needs were my family's needs. And if their needs were met, then I felt that mine were" (H5-16-19). For many, the next step was to develop a strategy for coping with the crisis.

One informant whose father was taken hostage described her mother's response:

From the *very* beginning she knew exactly what she was going to do . . . I think because she can think. She can just sit down and just think through and say, "What are the things that I need to do and how do we need to get through this and how do we need to portray ourselves?" She's brilliant. She's brilliant, and she knows sort of how to size things up. (H2-20-9)

She herself was more hesitant at first, feeling the emotional effect of being geographically distant from parts of her immediate family. Her initial response was to

“try and just kind of come together and connect” with her older sister (H2-3-14). “It was more just kind of trying to talk through what’s going on, what do we do, and how do we handle this?” (H2-3-18).

One family became the focus of intense scrutiny following the Columbine shooting. Their son, a Columbine student, shared his eyewitness account of the early stage of the Harris and Klebold attack with local media. That interview was broadcast repeatedly, and generated more media interest. That family, too, responded by developing a strategy.

We tried to keep it real tight and real small. We didn’t go with any of the big names because I knew people would say, “Oh, you know, she’s just trying to get in with Katie Couric. She’s just trying to get in with Barbara Walters.” So I didn’t do any of those interviews. (C7-5-20)

The Oklahoma City bombing was a tragedy of such epic proportions that there were not too many uplifting news stories to be covered beyond the community’s incredible unified response. One exception, however, was when survivors emerged from the building. One rescue was carried on live national television, and that survivor became highly sought out to tell his story. He and his family made some critical decisions early on. The first was that they would screen their telephone calls, and would be extremely selective in whose calls they returned—especially from amongst the news media. They felt this gave them a measure of control, and enabled them to selectively initiate media encounters rather than simply reacting.

I think that was helpful that we were able to make the choices, rather than choices being made for us. . . . We made a conscious decision, probably the night of the bombing, what are we going to do. We’re a family that does talk a lot and you know, sorta talks out problems, and our thing was we need to get back to normal as soon as possible. That’s important for us. (O6-19-20)

By the third day following the bombing, they had further refined their plan. The husband worked during the day and set aside 30 minutes before dinner to take or return phone calls every evening from 5:30 to 6 p.m. Calling the media offered a tactical advantage.

The nice thing about us calling them, we could say, "Here's what we can talk about, what we're comfortable talking about." And so we set some guidelines, and if they weren't comfortable with that, if they said, "We'll get back with you," you knew that probably isn't what they wanted. (O5-20-10)

Responding to the crisis by developing a plan was a common theme among informants. One exemplar whose husband was taken hostage in Lebanon felt that as bad as the situation was, she was fortunate to be well-placed geographically and professionally to be an active player behind the scenes.

I think that from the first moment, and of course I was in a perfect location [Washington, D.C.] when it happened . . . I was in a good location in my head. I was disciplined . . . and so there were some actions I took early on that I think positioned me well to . . . make a strategy and carry it out. (H5-2-13)

Her sense of presence in the aftermath of receiving the frightening news about her husband showed her colleagues and other government officials working the issue that she could handle the details and be an asset to efforts to seek her husband's safe return. "So I was able to, I think, keep control—at least outwardly—from the very, very first moment and to me, that was important. Because that's how I wanted to respond. I wanted to be in control" (H5-4-16). Her focus enabled her literally to develop a strategic plan that included assembling a group of trusted advisors (whom she called her "Bubbas") to help direct her efforts, creating a communications plan, determining who would be the most effective family spokesperson, networking, and expanding her knowledge of Middle Eastern affairs through concentrated study (H5). Shortly thereafter, she even arranged to undergo a short, but intensive, media training program.

In developing their plans to respond to the crisis in general and the issue of the media in particular, informants knowingly drew on several sources. Informants looked toward the examples of others (people known to them or strangers) to help determine what their behavior in this situation should be and also drew on their own socialization (how they were raised) and values. Examples of others included personal role models as well as the experience of strangers whose stories informants had seen the media cover in the past. These factors, combined with informants' existing attitudes toward the news media (discussed in a subsequent section), appeared to have a strong influence on other work to be done: for some, deliberately creating a public persona and learning how to be an exemplar.

#### Socialization and Personas

How people were socialized emerged as an important factor in how they dealt with the media and how they sought or allowed themselves to be portrayed.

Socialization was not just how they were raised and the values they held, but involved their evaluation of how other exemplars (those they saw on television or read about) behaved or performed in times of crisis. Among other things, socialization enabled informants to determine what their own comfort levels were regarding self-disclosure.

For some, the boundaries on self-disclosure were very clear. An informant who lost two children in the daycare center of the Murrah Building put it very succinctly. In referring to people who may have seen coverage of her children's funeral or interviews she has given in her effort to demand a complete and accurate investigation of the attack, she said, "They have seen my pain, but they haven't seen my tears. I don't cry in public. . . . I went home and cried" (O7-20-20).

Similarly, other informants from Oklahoma City knew from the outset that any interaction they agreed to with the media would need to be on an informational and not emotional level. This helped them decide which interviews to accept:

O6 (wife): He tried to be very selective and deal with people more on an informational level than—

O5 (husband): —An emotional level.

O6: Yeah, we just aren't emotional people so that . . .

O5: We don't show it, I mean, we don't . . .

Researcher: You wouldn't be on the *Jerry Springer Show*, is that what you're saying?

O6: Exactly. We're like, Leeza [Gibbons of *The Leeza Show*] called, and Oprah Winfrey called [sing-song voice] and, you know, we just didn't return those calls.

O5: We did *Today* and CNN. (O6-10-10)

There seemed to be a clear distinction: people did not seem to mind having their pain or grief represented (in fact, one informant specifically said she found it cathartic to let others know how painful her loss was), but they did want their dignity to be preserved.

Other examples of socialization were more subtle. When asked about why she was so willing to give of her time and share her story with journalists, a Columbine student answered that it had a lot to do with who she was. "That's the kind of person I am. If somebody needs help, I'm gonna give it to them. If somebody needs a ride somewhere, I'll give them a ride. If somebody needs me to help with their homework, I'll help them" (C4-12-10). This young woman's family is very active in community politics and civic causes, so it was not surprising to hear her "step up to the plate" attitude.



Following the Murrah Building bombing, one informant was interviewed as he walked up the street away from the wreckage. While he has seen the interview, he does not remember giving it. He speculated that he was accustomed to answering questions in his line of work and so it was not surprising he answered the reporter's questions. "I guess it was just kind of a normal reaction. If somebody had stopped me on the street and asked me a question, I was gonna answer it" (O5-3-12). This is in contrast to some people whose automatic response—due to upbringing or environment—may be driven by the rule of "Don't talk to strangers."

One Columbine parent also alluded to her socialization to explain why she spoke to some reporters. "When somebody asks a question I always answer. [It is how] I've been taught, you know?" (C7-5-16).

An anecdote shared by the wife of a former Iran hostage provides an example of the role family socialization played in their response to the crisis, and also how seeing another family's example reinforced the approach they had chosen. She described how she and her two high school-aged children were watching the news one night. They watched a news story in which a reporter interviewed two children of another hostage, children who were also in high school.

This voice [the reporter] asked, "Well, how are you doing?" "Oh, I worry about my father so much. I'm not doing very well in school, and some days I just can't go to school, I feel so bad." Well, my two sat there and almost threw up. . . . "Oh, for heaven's sakes, what's wrong with that kid?" You know, because our two were busy working as hard as they could to make their father proud of them. They were not gonna let him down! (H4-14-9)

Quite a few informants came to their experience with some form of media experience. One informant was a public information officer, two were currently or previously professional journalists, and one of the students was a high school journalist

considering a future career in sports journalism. To varying degrees, informants consciously set about learning how to be an exemplar and deliberately constructing what would be their public persona.

One informant who was in her mid-twenties at the time her father was taken hostage in Lebanon turned to the example of her mother.

I had seen enough of my Mom's interactions that Mom was really my mentor as to how we were going to handle things, and that you handle all of that with strength and dignity and integrity and that you don't let 'em see you sweat. I guess that's the thing. (H2-14-8)

This informant also saw that her mother's approach was to turn things around somewhat. The mother did not let the crisis define their lives at the expense of other important elements such as maintaining life-long friendships and the children pursuing their futures (H2-4-12). This philosophy became the basis of the persona the informant, as well as her mother and sisters, chose to project. "So that all started the ball rolling as to when you're in the media, what kind of persona do you want to be. What do you want to portray in the media?" (H2-4-22).

Having such a persona in mind helped this informant be assertive when working with media:

E6: And I said, "Do you want an interview or do you want to just have me look like this [making a very sad face] and just say whatever you want?"

Researcher: What did they say?

E6: And they said, "No! We want to know how you feel." And I said, "Then don't just put my ugly [sad] faces on camera! I don't want to portray us like that. . . . I want them to know who we are and what our family is like and how our family is dealing with it. I don't want these negative little sound bites going out just to get 'the widow on the set.' . . . We've got to make it something stronger and something positive." (H2-9-4)

One of the main things the family wanted to convey was that they were aware of and accepted the risks of being in Lebanon, but they felt there was important work to be done there. They were not looking for sympathy. Instead, they wanted the family's strength and spirit to be represented: their faith in their loved one's eventual safe return and their appreciation for the support people volunteered. To respond to the crisis in this manner was the most powerful way they could express support for their loved one in captivity (H2-15-9).

Another informant drew on the lessons of a live-in teacher, her husband. She attributed his mentoring to her being strong and able to respond to adversity with integrity and honesty and somehow come out okay on the other end (H5-2-3). She drew on this when he was taken hostage in Lebanon and later murdered by his captors.

#### Putting Down Anchors

The seminal news events in the lives of these exemplars occurred much like a flash flood: there was often no warning, and the family members and survivors were left to cope with physical and emotional wreckage long after the storm waters had receded. In one form or another, informants and their families constructed and relied on anchors to keep their lives together in the midst of chaos and the numerous demands on their time and energy.

The anchor for one family was re-establishing their normal family life as quickly as possible insofar as responsibilities following the Oklahoma City bombing allowed. Thus, one survivor's wife consciously and deliberately set about re-establishing a routine home life. That included the decision that she herself would not give interviews although her story was compelling in many ways. When asked about this latter decision, she explained:

Because I was his “normal.” I wasn’t in the bombing. . . . It was for me to have supper on the table at six o’clock. It was for me to keep his life normal and the way it had always been. He had his staff at work, the people that were left. That was his support group as far as the bombing was concerned. . . . The only thing I did was keep a list of the people that had called and when he got home from work, he would call them back between 5:30 and 6:00. Other than that, my role was to keep his life, that he knew he had a normalcy through all the other chaos that was going on. I mean, he had to set up a new office, he had to hire new people, he had to deal with the emotions of the bombing—all of that. He knew that when he came home it was normal. (O5-20-19)

### Constructing the Media

Informants’ construction of the media varied considerably in relation to the news event (before and after) and whether the interaction with the media in general or specific reporters was a “one-shot deal” or ongoing. Contrary to the expression “familiarity breeds contempt,” the more most informants interacted with the press, the higher the regard in which they held the media.

Many informants reported their impressions of media were changed by their experience. Others just had not given journalists themselves much thought previously.

I read our newspaper every single day, and I go through it. But I never even really thought about journalists. I always thought, well, you know there are journalists out there; they’re nothing like we college professors. We’re where the action is and everything! [laughing] (H1-8-1)

In the eyes of informants, media are not all created equal. Informants constructed journalists and news organizations favorably depending on whether they were “serious journalists” or “tabloid rags” (H1-9-13).

One Columbine informant differentiated among media quite clearly. “I don’t put media in one thing. News collectors are one thing” (C1-8-6). He contrasted news sources like CNN and Montel Williams (as an example of a more informative talk show) with nationally-syndicated radio personality Howard Stern who used the Columbine students’ traumatic experiences as fodder for jokes (“As far as I’m concerned, [Stern’s]

talking about my daughter”) (C1-8-1). He also highlighted the difference between journalists who genuinely are seeking the exemplars’ points of view with those who merely want an interview that they can twist to their own agenda (C1-18-18).

After working extensively with reporters and other news media representatives, informants from each of the news events (hostage situations, Oklahoma City, and Columbine) found they saw many journalists in both their professional role, but also as friends. One exemplar said not only did the media not make their situation more difficult than it was, but that media were actually one of the positive aspects of her story.

It [the media interaction] was a good experience. I had people come in my house and it was almost like we were friends. It was funny—it was like you knew them and you were friends with them immediately, and it helped us get through it. It helped us. . . . Maybe they made us laugh a little, or they’d answer the phone for us, and say, “Do you need anything? Can we bring food?” I mean, they were great. They were! I cannot tell you what a good experience it was. We made friends nationally. People don’t have to call you back, they don’t [have to] care, but they still care. (C7-20-10)

Another informant who made many close friends in the media described the process as an evolution. It helped her that over the course of the years of regional news outlets covering her family’s hostage ordeal that the cadre of reporters remained fairly constant.

I had to try and find a way to see these people. . . . They were specific people . . . so they became less of an entity and more of a person. And they got involved, so it was less a “story” as it was more of an interaction, a relationship if you will. (H2-5-5)

She recalled how she felt when her father was finally released and the media was there to cover that story also:

And I just remember seeing all of them, and they were my friends, but they were also [my home state], and there were so many people back there that had just done so much. And I just saw when I looked at those guys, and I thought, this whole time we’ve worked together on this and this has been our thing, the media, and me, and our family. And I thought this is their greatest time media-wise, and

this is Dad's greatest time media-wise, and people want to know, and people want to see him. (H2-31-22)

She wanted to celebrate, and she felt the media had earned the right to celebrate this happy occasion also—that they were now part of the story (H2-32-6).

And as part of the story, members of the media could also be changed by that story:

And I would like to think that it taught them a little bit as it taught us a little bit of how to maybe even get a better story, because what it is isn't just a story but it's the people that are involved in it. And you don't necessarily go for the sound bite. You don't necessarily get a good sound bite by, you know, just going up and sticking [a microphone] in their face and trying to get it, but also trying to understand. (H2-10-15)

This informant later invited members of the media to another happy occasion. "They all came to my wedding! . . . You're not here to take pictures, you're here to drink!" (H2-34-21).

### Privacy, Process, and Meaning

Americans seem to carry on an uncomfortable love-hate relationship with the news media. On the one hand, the news and the "infotainment" industries can live down to their very worst reputations. On the other hand, these same institutions can offer some individuals and groups understanding, tangible and intangible support, and the opportunity to foster positive changes from the roots of tragedy. Data analysis for this study centered on how informants perceived, explained, and interpreted their exemplification experience in relation to the constructs of privacy, process, and meaning.

#### Privacy

The Webster's Dictionary defines privacy as being private, seclusion, and secrecy (1977). The general American public may consider privacy to be the absence of reporters and their invasive equipment. Or, privacy may be considered to be the lack of

intrusion. The first step to understanding privacy and how it relates to exemplification is to attempt to define the term as the informants did. Table 3 presents some of the key themes informants offered in response to interview questions concerning privacy, and serves as an outline for the following discussion.

Table 3

Key Themes relating to Privacy

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How defined by informants

- Physical Privacy
- Emotional/Psychological Privacy

How Privacy was Breached

How Privacy was Achieved

- Gatekeepers
- Physical Seclusion
- Technological Seclusion
- Disguises and Anonymity
- Setting Boundaries

Privacy Paradox

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Physical privacy. Informants used the term privacy in the physical context. As Goffman (1959) described in his metaphor of the theater, people have a front stage and a back stage. When on the front stage, people expect their performances to be public. However, the back stage is a private place, off-limits to outsiders. A back stage area is a

sanctuary of sorts, a place where people dispense with certain role playing and are free to take off masks. It is an apt metaphor, particularly for people struggling with grief who find the need to put on a strong face for others.

Interestingly, people define their back stage in different ways and have different levels of tolerance for having outsiders in or near that area. One functional example of this is where informants were comfortable meeting with the researcher for the interviews for this study. Most interviews were done in people's homes, but others were in more neutral areas such as library conference rooms. Of the interviews conducted in people's homes, some informants invited the researcher into more private areas of the home to share examples of memorabilia or artifacts relating to the news events.

That people would consider their home their castle is not surprising. On the other hand, some of the informants were quite comfortable with numerous media in and around their home, even at the most hectic times. One informant, the mother of a Columbine student who gave numerous local and national interviews, described the onslaught: "On the second day it started, heavily. *Everyone* pulled up to our house. The lawn was full, the front was just full of cars" (C7-5-2). She said the media personnel around her house did not inconvenience them, nor was she concerned about the family's privacy and security.

I know it was raining a lot, and I know some of them would say, "Could I sit on the porch?" and I didn't care. You know, they weren't destroying anything, they were just being sent for a job, and I knew that. And they were all nice. They were being polite. Although I don't think the neighbors liked it. (E9-22-22)

The informant shared an anecdote of an extraordinary example of just how comfortable this Colorado family was having news media in and around their house:

Another interesting thing that happened was one national newspaper came in, and I was having a terrible day. That was when *Inside Edition* was here, and my



phone was ringing, . . . the doorbell was ringing, and she's in my house. And I said to her, "Take off your badge [media credential] and say you're my friend, and help me out here." And she answered my phone and she helped me get them [*Inside Edition*] out of here. She was great. (C7-11-21)

The informant's trust in the media representative, demonstrated by letting the woman into the home and allowing her to represent herself as a family friend, may be unthinkable to others in the midst of a "media siege." The informant explained her family's high comfort level in quite simple terms: "We have nothing to hide" (C7-9-16).

Psychological or emotional privacy. Informants also defined privacy in a psychological or emotional sense. One informant, whose husband was a hostage in Lebanon, designated a trusted professional colleague as a family spokesman (H5-17-8). In the initial days of the family's crisis, the spokesman slept on the couch and ran interference on the phone and at the door.

H5: He screened all the calls and he came to realize who I was interested in talking with and who I was not, and what information he could pass to which people, and so we dealt very closely. I was still calling the shots, but to have someone as an intermediary . . .

Researcher: Gave you space, thinking room, privacy?

H5: Exactly. And I . . . would recommend to anybody who goes through this to do that. (H5-17-14)

In addition to emotional space, informants in their narratives also defined privacy as having control over self-disclosure. Whether formally established in discussions about ground rules or interview content, informants had definite comfort levels for personal or sensitive information which they would or would not discuss. The informants' comfort levels were based on socialization and their needs and goals given the circumstances of their situation. Sometimes, quiet people found the need to be quite public for a time (C7-19-12) and vice versa (H5).

One common boundary or behavior was the unwillingness of informants to infringe on the understood right of others to decide for themselves whether they were willing to self-disclose and to what degree. In other words, if a reporter asked someone a personal question, that person could answer or decline as he or she felt comfortable. But a reporter asking someone a personal question about another person was off limits. For example, that was one of the criteria an Oklahoma City family used when deciding whether or not to speak to certain media members.

I really did not talk to any of them that called and wanted to know names of my employees [who worked in the Murrah Building]. . . . They [the media] wanted to interview the families of those people who were, at that point in time, missing. I said, "No. I will not divulge. Their privacy needs to be respected." So those people, that's all they got from us. . . . I figured they probably had other ways to get that information, but they're not gonna get it from me. (O5-9-16)

This consideration extended from parents to their children, that is, letting their children decide whether or not to consent to interviews (C1, C8, & H5). This was true even in cases where the parents had chosen to have as little media interaction as possible (C9, C10, & C11).

That people have different levels and needs for privacy was best demonstrated in one informant's response to the question, "Were your expectations of privacy met?" "I didn't want any privacy. I had too much privacy. When you're by yourself, you talk, you think. I didn't want to think. I still don't want to think" (O7-35-14).

How exemplars were approached. When covering large or important news stories, the media tend to be very aggressive in seeking out memorable or authoritative exemplars. Informants in this study reported a great variety of means that the media employed to contact them. Some were first contacted in physical public places related to the news event. In Colorado, this type of contact occurred at the elementary school and

county library where parents were reuniting with their kids, and in the county park and neighborhood areas adjacent to the school where students were treated or were hanging out after escaping the building. In Oklahoma, it occurred outside of the bombing site, in and around hospitals, and at the crisis center set up to take care of families of the still missing.

Most were called on their home or office phone or visited at their house. Names and addresses for nonpublic figures are commonly available in community phone directories or through Internet white pages. Some informants were not sure how they were found by some members of the media (C9 & C10). One informant's wife was staying at a cabin near Rocky Mountain National Park when a reporter came knocking on her door (H1). Another informant was matter-of-fact in saying, "Our number is unlisted. Everybody had it" (C7-11-21). One informant who works for local government in Oklahoma City and carries a pager in an official capacity was surprised to have reporters use that means to reach him.

My pager would go off periodically, and it would be some area code that didn't look familiar to me. And I'd dial it and it'd be some lady or man, station KPIX in St. Louis or something, you know. They'd ask me some questions, and I'm sitting here thinking "How in thunder did they get my pager number?" (O4-15-18)

He said someone could call his employer and find out he had a pager, but that the organization as a matter of policy does not give out pager numbers or home addresses and phone numbers. Some informants said they just did not know how media found and contacted them. Although in these interviews, informants were resolute in their conviction to attempt to protect the privacy of others, it is likely that others in their circles of intimacy (friends, acquaintances, and colleagues) were not as circumspect.

Many informants found that all it took was one interview in which they were properly identified to start the media requests rolling in. (In fact, this was one technique the researcher employed in identifying and seeking out informants.) The Columbine situation provided many examples of this. “It takes just one reporter—and that’s when it started. One report, your face is on the TV, and that’s it” (C7-4-7).

None of the media knew that I was doing anything or knew who I was or my name, but then after that [a live *Today Show* appearance the day after the Columbine shooting] . . . Oh my gosh! I went to Montel Williams on Wednesday, and then I came back on Friday, and I think I had at least 50 messages of people I was supposed to call back. (C4-8-4)

Achieving privacy. Perhaps one of the enduring impressions of news media in America is of hordes of reporters and media personnel accosting individuals and families at incredibly stressful times: coming out of funeral services, at the scene of a car accident, emerging from courtrooms, etc. It appears to viewers and readers alike there must be no place for these people to hide; they cannot seem to get away from the media. The informants, however, shared stories of a variety of ways they, sometimes with the help of others, were able to achieve some needed privacy. These tools and techniques included the use of gatekeepers (assistance of public servants, support from friends, and technology) and simply “going underground.”

Gatekeepers took many forms, but were effective in providing informants and their families with a “back stage” area or the most basic level of privacy. As described earlier, some people designated an official family representative as a “go to” person for the media and as a means of screening calls and limiting access to family members. Who the gatekeeper was depended on resources (who was available) and experience or temperament (who knew what they were doing and could be firm). Availability was key, and included physical proximity as well as time. For example, the responsibility of

spokesperson for one Lebanon hostage's family fell to a 25-year-old daughter. She was the one family member most often available in the family's hometown (the hostage's wife was in Beirut to work the situation from that end), and her occupation at the time gave her a little more flexibility than her sister, a doctoral candidate in the sciences (although media opportunities nevertheless were time-consuming and did impose on her work). As in this case, the official family spokesperson could be a family member (H1, H2) or a friend or colleague (H5).

Other people—nonfamily members—sometimes served as *de facto* family representatives on a temporary or long-term basis. One example is the situation described earlier of the Columbine informant who co-opted a news producer to provide assistance one particularly busy day. A different hostage family, one that chose to be more private and far less available to the media in general, came to rely on a trusted local reporter to serve as a liaison to other media sent to cover their story. This particular family was grateful to their hometown for the tangible and intangible support they received from the community. The family wanted to keep the town up to date on the crisis and express gratitude for the support, but did not want to live out their ordeal in a public manner. They came to know, trust, and rely upon a responsible local reporter. They could discuss developments with this reporter confident that he would not sensationalize the story or abuse the access they had allowed him. In turn, he advised them on releasing statements to the press (to give them something so they would go away) and ultimately helped run a press conference for the family when the hostage was released (H4).

Gatekeepers—bidden or unbidden—came in other forms. Law enforcement departments scheduled extra patrols in some of the informants' neighborhoods to provide

a sense of security and to discourage any unlawful intrusive behavior on the part of media or curiosity seekers (H4 & H5). Sometimes, the family was not even aware of the support they were being given until later. An informant whose husband was a hostage and who had clearly established her desire for privacy heard this story from a third party:

Unbeknownst to us, the local sheriff had set up a road block. And as all those people [reporters] came in, he just directed them to the church parking lot. "You can wait here, Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't want to see you." And this went on and on. . . . There was a reporter from Dayton, a television crew from Dayton, who said, "Well, what's to stop me from just driving around that roadblock and going up that hill?" And the sheriff, the good old sheriff, typical redneck sheriff, you know, six-two or -three, big guy, about in his 50s, and he said, "I will." And [the reporter is] claiming his First Amendment rights . . . or the right of the public to know and all this and so forth, and this guy said, "Well, how are you gonna stop me?" And the sheriff said, "Well, I'll just take off my badge, and take off my gun belt." He says, "You're not going up that hill!" (H4-30-2)

The U.S. government ensured released hostages and their families had at least a modicum of privacy. Hostages who have been released from captivity typically have been routed through a U.S. Air Force hospital complex in Wiesbaden, Germany. There, while undergoing intelligence debriefings and getting medical examinations, hostages could reunite with loved ones in the privacy of the hospital facility, access to which was tightly controlled. In addition to a stay at Wiesbaden, repatriated hostages from the Iran crisis were flown to a more secluded air field in upstate New York instead of Washington, D.C., for their initial homecoming. This was done at the behest of family members.

The family organization said, "We don't want to be overrun. . . . We don't want to be meeting our loved one, whom we haven't seen for 14 months, and give him a big hug and a kiss in front of the whole world." I mean, you know, this is a private occasion! It's gonna be emotional enough without someone and their zoom lens. (H4-54-22)

Other gatekeepers and advisers included hospital administrators who controlled release of patient information (C9 & C10), State Department and military members in the

role of public affairs officers (H1, H4, & H5), and military members in the form of escorts for family members at the crisis center in Oklahoma City (O3 & O2). Friends and officials also told “little white lies” when asked by reporters how to find an informant’s house:

And they came in there immediately, or someone did, newspaper, whoever, came in there and were looking to find \_\_\_\_\_. And Joe [a long-time friend and a next door neighbor] said, “I have no idea where she lives.” See, people protected me! They went to the Police Department, they didn’t know where I lived. [chuckling] . . . I didn’t find out about it until later, but I was being protected. (H4-21-12)

As technology has enabled reporters to be more intrusive, e.g., sensitive microphones and telephoto lenses, technology also has provided some countermeasures. Tools include answering machines and caller identification systems (C9, C10, O5, O6, & H4) and even more mundane items like automatic garage door openers which allow people to enter and exit their homes quickly and efficiently (H5). Informants’ experiences suggest that telephone answering machines do not have a long life expectancy in the face of intense media interest, however (H2 & H4).

Particularly if a news happening is not solely about one individual or family, people have a surprising ability to assume a cloak of privacy. Informants relayed stories about how this could be done, sometimes simply by leaving town or going on vacation: “getting the hell out of Dodge” as it were. “We went on vacation the next day so if anybody would call, they wouldn’t find us at home” (C9-12-2). One family sought out by reporters following the Oklahoma City bombing dealt with media calls for just a week:

O6:           Well, we went away. We went on vacation.

O5: Yeah. That was the nicest thing. . . . That was so nice to be able to go into a restaurant in Ohio and have dinner. And nobody came up and recognized me. (O6-16-16)

Clothes and accoutrements can help “disguise” people when they are not in a situation or mindset in which they want to interact with the media. Media coverage followed the release of the hostages from Iran as they traveled as a group to Frankfurt, Germany; West Point, New York; and finally on to Washington, D.C. where they were hosted at the White House by President Reagan.

Researcher: I would imagine in Washington, the scale of the media must have been exponential, and it was probably large. No?

H3: Only if you let it be. (H3-58-2)

The former hostage donned a new plaid lumberjack style shirt, and he and his family simply drove out of Washington and the public eye in a rented red station wagon. “The red station wagon, lumberman’s suit and nobody ever thought I was a hostage” (H3-71-6).

One volunteer during search-and-rescue efforts following the Murrah Building attack found himself drawn to return to the site several days later: “I did come down a night or two later on my own, with my camera. Something I felt I needed to do—I don’t know why—a closure thing or what not. It was very moving, a very quiet time for me” (O1-17-23). He described how, as he went around the building, people stopped to talk to him. Because of the camera around his neck, many people he chatted with asked him if he was a reporter (O1-18-13). This informant even went inside “Satellite City,” the large area filled with news vans and reporters:

Researcher: No one asked you your story and why you were there?

O1: No.



Researcher: So you stayed anonymous. A rescue worker snuck through their midst!

O1: I'm kind of glad. I really didn't want an interview. . . . I would look and scan the scene and walk past them, and I think they felt I was a reporter of some kind. I looked like one! (O1-20-17)

By not playing the part of a returning hostage or by looking more like a reporter—one of them—some informants found they had anonymity and a welcome freedom of movement.

Finally, perhaps the simplest and most overlooked method of maintaining privacy in the face of intense media interest was to, in the words of former First Lady Nancy Reagan, “Just say no.” Several informants told how they stated their desire for privacy. The family of one student severely injured in the Columbine shooting stayed out of public view by not releasing their child's name to the general public:

C9 (mother): We let basic information be released, just not his name. And without releasing his name, that kept us away from everything.

C10 (father): We just didn't want to be bothered with it. . . . They gave him an alias name in the hospital. . . . And because of that, a week or so that he was in there, everything had kind of blown over a little bit and they just kinda forgot about us in a way, I guess. (C9-1-21)

This decisive act made it harder for the media to find and contact the family, but perhaps even more importantly conveyed the strong desire for privacy. As it turned out, some media were aware of the student's name early on because some classmates had inadvertently released it to reporters (C11-10-20), and the family later chose to release their child's name when the medical condition was less severe (C10-5-16). Significantly, the media did not aggressively seek out this family.

Informing the media of their intention not to give interviews or to restrict the subjects that were fair game in an interview seemed to save time and frustration. It is not

in news media organizations' interests to assign reporters and crews to a dead-end story angle. As one former hostage stated, "I made that clear this was my one and only press conference. Basically they left me alone" (H3-65-1).

In addition to telling the media directly, informants also knowingly used body language to keep media members from even approaching. One family member of a victim of the Oklahoma City bombing described the walk between the victim's center and the parking lot, past the area to which media were confined: "You learned to just not look at 'em. Not even look over at the row of reporters, just look that way, don't look over there!" (O3-15-1). Another informant, the wife of a former Iran hostage, learned a similar lesson and applied some earlier experience she had picked up overseas.

They [the media] want to get you talking. And if you just say no, or just keep your mouth [closed], like you do with the beggars. Just don't make eye contact! The beggars in India—don't make eye contact and pretend they don't exist. . . . Americans are so polite, and sometimes I think with the media you almost have to be rude to get them off your back, to make them go away. (H4-70-4)

If dealing with the media often resembled a game of cat and mouse, informants seemed to derive some ironic pleasure in putting one over on the media or being able to slip by reporters unrecognized. The Columbine family that chose to protect their child's identity did receive a call from the media one day. The media staff member was busy just calling names, casting a wide net to track down a student with possible connections to the shooters, and never realized that he was talking to family members who themselves had an important—and yet unheard—story of the event (C10-10-10).

A similar thing occurred at a Washington, D.C., airport when the wife and child of a hostage were returning home from a trip:

H5:           [My stepdaughter] and I had to laugh, we literally laughed. . . . There was a media crew, a film crew *right in front of us*, a national news crew, right in front of us . . .

Researcher: And you walked right past them?

H5: And we were behind them, and the guy at the metal detector asked them what they were in town for or something like that, and they said, "Oh the \_\_\_\_\_ trial" or something and we kind of laughed, because we were right there. They had a great story. They could have covered us. They could have interviewed us and didn't even bother us. And we literally laughed about it. We thought it was humorous. So that may have helped in some way to separate some of the media hype. (H5-23-7)

Another ironic example of just how easy it is for even extensively covered individuals to go unrecognized took place in Germany when one hostage was finally released after more than five years in captivity. In consideration of the support media members in his home state had shown to his situation and to his family over the years (and against all advice from State Department handlers!), the hostage dropped by the reporters' hotel to give them an exclusive interview. "We got in a car and went over to the hotel, and do you know: nobody even recognized me at all!" (H1-40-23).

Privacy paradox. The issue of privacy raises an interesting paradox. To an astounding degree, some informants found that the more open and responsive they as a family were to the media and the media's needs, the more privacy the media extended to that family in return. One former hostage contrasted his experience with the media to that of other hostages:

My feeling is this: If the media wants you to talk to them, you're much better off to talk to them and tell them everything you know that would be of any interest to them whatsoever, and answer their questions clearly and fully and then [bomp!] they leave you alone. And I took that philosophy from the very first press conference. . . . Now \_\_\_\_\_ didn't do that. He ran away from the media and they hounded him. (H1-29-23)

A former hostage's daughter echoed that sentiment:

You can spend an awful lot of time trying to run away from it and it's so much easier to stay. These are the things we need to do, this is how we need to handle it, do it, give them what you want to give them, and then it's done. (H2-31-3)

Her account gives the impression that an unwritten pact existed between her family and the media, a pact that both sides honored.

They knew we weren't a run-and-hide kind of family. . . . So the media felt like we don't have to try and climb walls or break into anywhere because they'll come to us and they'll give us what we want and what we need. So I felt like we did that, too. (H2-34-6)

Another informant talked about how going out to the media can result in less intrusion:

The media is generally good. They can give you information. They can help you provide information to your family and friends. And they can help to diminish further media attention. I mean, if the AP [Associated Press] has got a story running in the papers, then it cuts down on tens of hundreds of other people coming to your door. (H5-44-7)

There are pragmatic explanations for why these arrangements worked and why the paradox of giving the media more ensured the exemplars' privacy more. First, media do not have time and resources to waste in covering a large news story. Logically, once they get a particular story, the media will move on to cover another angle or another story altogether. Also, from a competitive aspect, journalists would all prefer to have an exclusive story or interview. The theory of supply and demand holds that the rarer the commodity, the greater is its value. By releasing her story to a news service (available to hundreds of news outlets), the hostage's spouse decreased the competitive value of her situation. There would not be a one-of-a-kind exclusive; her story had already been told.

Public "private moments." A final note on privacy: viewers and readers more often than not consider the news media unnecessarily intrusive when they see coverage of generally private events such as funerals or see shocking photos of deceased or injured victims. Arguably, it is a taken-for-granted assumption that these are just more examples of the media's often sensationalized coverage and its "if it bleeds, it leads" editorial

policy. It should be noted, however, that families sometimes invite the media in to cover such heart-wrenching gatherings and also sometimes give consent when asked for the use of disturbing graphic images of their loved ones.

An Oklahoma City informant who lost two family members and knew 18 others that were killed in the bombing provided her perspective:

Researcher: Did you have any problems or any control over whether the media covered the funeral or memorial service, if there was one?

O7: There were only two, let me see—Channel 4 and Channel 9, I think—called me and asked if they could cover the funeral. They were the only two that were inside the church.

Researcher: And they had permission?

O7: They had permission. . . . I wanted the whole world to know who \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were. They were very special little boys. And that was the only way to introduce this country, this world, to those little boys. (O7-19-8)

The informant went on to describe how outside the church, the cemetery fence was lined with news crews (she was later told by her sons), but she did not even notice the media.

Researcher: You didn't even notice?

O7: No. And still that would have been okay, because that was a story that needed to be told. The American people needed to know about these crazy people in this country and what they did. (O7-22-1).

Another informant who lost a loved one to terrorists said she understood that people may be surprised by her opinion, but that she *wanted* the media to use the disturbing photo of her deceased husband:

And this country needs to remember him, remember his sacrifice and make sure these kinds of things don't happen. And I think in order to get that message across, the best way to do that is through this picture. . . . Even now people ask me, when they're doing stories or follow-ups or something, they'll ask me is it

okay to use this picture. And I think that's very nice. The media ask me that all the time and I tell them yes. (H5-52-9)

This point is not made to exonerate the media necessarily as perhaps far more examples exist where families did not extend an invitation or provide consent. In fairness, however, viewers and readers sometimes may be too quick to condemn the media for their alleged offenses.

### Process of Exemplification

Many of the mechanics of the process of exemplification have been touched on in previous sections. A particular goal of this study was to explore how media encounters unfolded for informants and to examine the degree to which exemplars appeared to be active or passive in the process. Was exemplification something the media constructed or the exemplar constructed or both? Was exemplification "done" or "done to them?" Key indicators were how informants signified control and power. In addition, informants directly characterized their own experience when asked. Table 4 presents some of the key themes to emerge in discussions about the process of exemplification.

Most of the informants clearly felt they maintained control during the actual media encounters to which they consented. Control was signified in many ways ranging from access to literally determining the beginning and ends of the interviews. The major pattern to emerge, however, was that despite the great amount of control exemplars possessed, the interview process was more collaborative and cooperative than directive. Exemplars with compelling eyewitness accounts and inside perspectives were highly sought after by reporters looking for the best story or the most definitive account. On the other side, news media representatives and outlets had control or incentives that they could offer exemplars in return. As long as exemplar and media goals were compatible

(e.g., an exemplar had a message and the media had a channel) collaboration and cooperation yielded good outcomes for all.

Table 4

Key Themes Relating to Process

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Control

- Power
- Signification of Control

Collaboration

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While collaboration appeared to be the most apt description for the majority of informants' experiences, there were some notable exceptions. One family defined their experience with the media as exceedingly exploitative, showing far more interest in their daughter as a news source than as a traumatized young person. The daughter, a Columbine student, witnessed the early part of the Harris and Klebold attack. "I was in the cafeteria, and you know those fake bombs they set? I was sitting—they were under my chair" (C2-2-6). She described how she noticed a commotion at tables near the window. "They got up from their table real fast. . . . I stood up to see what was going on and I saw a guy with a gun. And he ran down and shot a girl, Anne-Marie Hochhalter, actually, and then I got under my table" (C2-2-10). A friend of hers and one of the science teachers helped her flee the cafeteria and take refuge in the storage room of an upstairs classroom with four other girls. "We were all huddled together in there and they [Harris and Klebold] came running through the halls and they were like shooting through

the walls, and you could feel it. . . . And we sat there with the lights off” (C2-3-21). Her ordeal inside the school building lasted several very emotional hours as she and other students waited or were hustled from room to room by SWAT members during the evacuation. She remembers being frisked three times on the way out of the building, being on the last bus of students to be reunited with their families, and seeing media. “I saw there were like tons of police barriers everywhere, and we could see camera news vans and everything all over. And I was like, ‘Hmmmm, okay, whatever’” (C2-4-5).

The informant described her impressions of the media who came up to her:

They had like no pity at all. . . . They were very monotone, showing no feeling whatsoever. They didn’t show remorse or anything, all they wanted—as I saw it, all they wanted was a story. They didn’t care that we were being hurt. I didn’t hear any inflection in one lady’s voice. (C2-6-1)

This informant and her family were angry about the media’s performance throughout the Columbine coverage, but most specifically for reporting so many rumors, trying to interpret something that was beyond understanding, and the media’s insensitivity toward their daughter after she got out of the school.

You need to talk about things. And she was trying to talk about this. And she was trying to tell them her experience, when all he was concerned about was why. He wasn’t really concerned about what had happened to her. It was like he kept interrupting and he kept asking these other questions. And I’m not saying that wasn’t his job, because that is his business to get news. But I don’t think at that vulnerable time people who are not willing to listen to what I have to say, who are interrupting and asking questions you don’t really want to discuss at that point in time. . . . It’s almost like “I don’t want to hear about that; I want to know about this.” And at that point in time, people need to talk about what they need to talk about. They don’t need to hear what you’re telling me isn’t important. . . . And then rushing to someone else, grabbing them, and then going to someone else. . . . Because right at that most vulnerable time, they’re already giving the impression that what happened to you doesn’t matter or what you feel doesn’t matter, what I am saying, what I am asking is what matters. And sometimes that shuts some gates, puts some barriers down there. (C3-3-21).



When asked if she had been on scene as a journalist how she might have handled the situation, the student was emphatic:

I don't think I could. I seriously don't think that I could be heartless about the people themselves. I think I would have a nervous breakdown because I care way too much for people to be able to be a journalist. (C2-13-13)

Another informant described a different situation following the Oklahoma City bombing that made her feel she did not have control. In the weeks after the blast but before her father's remains had been recovered, this informant spent many days at the crisis center established for family members. The news media were not allowed inside the building, but many were staked out in a bullpen outside. Even though the informant did not choose to interact with the media directly, she found going back and forth from her car to the building caused added stress.

And the very last thing you want to think of is do I have something unfortunate hanging from my nose? Because you've been crying or something—you worry about that stuff at that time. But if your picture is going to be blasted all over the news—it's not only local but the whole country is watching—you think that. You do! (O3-15-1)

This informant had already been burned by such an experience:

You want to go outside for fresh air, and you can't. Because your every move is photographed and on the news! Your every move! I mean, the wind blew up my dress one day and I had these peach leggings, they were like skin tone, but up close you could tell they were leggings. I always wear leggings under dresses here in windy Oklahoma. And the wind blew up my dress, and I didn't think anything of it at the time. You know, I was 'Duh!' [oblivious] And I get home and my friends are calling and saying, "Man! Did you even have any underwear on? I can't believe it, your dress blew up!" Oh my God! They put that on the air! (O3-10-20)

Exemplars related a few incidents where they felt journalists had an agenda in mind for how the interview would play out. At the least, it was an irritation to feel the journalist had already composed the story and was now just expecting the exemplars to play their roles and speak their lines. A New York City-based journalist seemed to

expect one hostage's family to be a "bunch of hayseeds" and was surprised to find instead that they were educated and media savvy (H2-11-21). Some media personnel from the MSNBC network took the comments of a Columbine student out of context in order to fit their story or views on gun control (C1-18-18). Her father was upset. "That's how it felt. That they had victimized my daughter" (C1-19-7). One informant understood that even his experience as a political reporter would not be enough to level the playing field in one encounter with a radio talk show host with disparate political views. After repeatedly cutting off the exemplar in mid-sentence, the radio host finally just hung up. The exemplar felt the radio host had intended to use the interview to belittle him and his views (C1-24-12).

The foregoing examples are all negative and all occurred in situations where there was little, if any, substantive control in the hands of the informants. This may support a linkage between level of control and how the outcomes of media encounters are perceived.

### Meanings and Outcomes of Exemplification

Most informants had no trouble answering questions relating specifically to the profound event. The questions about what the exemplification process meant to them, however, seemed a bit more difficult. For some, questions like these were overshadowed by the many meanings entwined with the event itself. For others, it was something they had just never had reason to consider. The themes that developed came through not as direct answers, then, but rather through the stories and anecdotes informants shared. Table 5 summarizes the major themes that emerged from informants' accounts of telling their stories through the news media.

Table 5

Key Themes Relating to Meanings and Outcomes

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Meanings of Exemplification

- Burden
- Responsibility
- Opportunity to make good from bad

## Outcomes of Exemplification

- Support (tangible and intangible)
  - Healing and Affirmation
  - Issues of Fairness in Coverage
- 

In talking about what the Columbine High School shooting means to the surrounding communities in South Jefferson County, one informant described it as “a burden, a responsibility, and an opportunity” (C1-9-19). That description is also perhaps the very best summary of what the exemplification process meant to many informants.

Burden. Although good can come from extensive media coverage of a story, the burdens—even under the best of circumstances—are not an easy load. Some of the burdens informants shared were the impact on family, becoming a verbal target for people who may hold a contrary opinion, and reliving painful events again and again in the form of continuing coverage.

Media interactions take time away from family lives and often divert the attentions of family members from one another to external concerns. The daughter of one informant expressed her disappointment in how media encounters interfered with

some favorite family activities. “It is kind of annoying after a while because then the more they interviewed us, the more my Dad got involved with it, and the more time he wasn’t spending at home” (C4-14-17).

In many cases, children (even adult children) needed quality time with parents to stay centered, yet that time was often hard to come by in the face of so many responsibilities to others. The daughter of a former hostage recounted how she was less than hospitable to a media visitor one day:

Mom came home and I was looking for time to just be with her, and she would sit on the phone, sit on the phone, sit on the phone, calling and doing this and doing that. And I just wanted time with her. All of a sudden [a reporter] from the newspaper came and knocked on my door, and he said, “We’re trying to find your Mom; do you know where she is?” And she was sitting right on my couch. And I just looked at him. And I’m embarrassed to say that I wasn’t as welcoming as I should have been, and I just looked at him. And probably for a minute I stared at him—poor guy—and then I just opened the door and she was sitting right there. He was tremendously apologetic, and he was very nice, and he was always a huge gentleman. But I do feel bad that at some points I became selfish and just wanted to spend time with Mom. . . . But you know, that was part of our responsibility. (H2-30-3)

Also painful was receiving negative feedback from strangers. One morning, a former hostage and a current hostage’s daughter participated in an interview on one of the major network news programs. Afterwards, the two went out to breakfast at a local McDonald’s restaurant. An employee dressed up in a clown suit walked up and asked them about it:

“What’s all this? How come you were on television?” So somebody said, it was about the hostages in Lebanon. And this clown says, “Well, they deserve what they got—shouldn’t have been in Lebanon anyway. . . . Serves them right, they got what they deserved!” and so on. (H1-39-11)

Fortunately in that case, the family member had the strength to deal with the hurtful comment. She later wrote, “I was glad my Dad had enough guts to go back to Lebanon

and enough brains to be more than a clown!” (H1-39-16). Although this exchange was with “some clown in a restaurant,” the informant’s wife had had a similar exchange with a reporter in an interview (H1-39-22).

One Columbine informant told the story of how during her participation in a radio talk show, one woman faxed in her comments.

A fax came through and it was a nasty fax, and they [the station] gave it to me—it had the phone number on there. So when I got home, I called her. And I just said, “What questions do you have?” . . . When I called her, she was like, “I can’t believe you called me.” And I said, “Well, ask me anything you want to ask.” So we discussed [her assumptions]. . . . She said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.” It just hurts your feelings when people say things like that. (C7-21-13)

She said she and her family did not have many experiences like that—very, very few—but “you don’t forget them” (C7-21-11).

Another Columbine informant has found the barrage of coverage and the repeated images to be especially hard.

Back then [right after the shooting] I didn’t want to read anything, because I started reading, and then somebody recorded coverage for us, too. And I started watching that, and I started having dreams, so I put it all away. And I thought, “Well, maybe one day I’ll want to read about it and just see how they covered it.” (C9-14-4)

Another aspect of Columbine coverage that has been a burden for the community is the frustration of having outsiders who were not there interpret the local culture and the possible ills that may have lead the young killers to act. This burden appears to be especially frustrating for the students.

I think when there’s so much going on and so many people saying what to think and how to think and what to believe that you don’t have an opportunity to say, “This is mine. This is my school. This is my life. This is what happened to us.” I think that’s what [my daughter’s] greatest anger has been. . . . She said these people don’t know, and it makes her angry when they say, “Well, I know how you felt.” She said, “No, they don’t!” (C3-8-8)

Responsibility. Many informants, particularly those from the Columbine and Oklahoma City tragedies, felt working with the media was a responsibility. For some, it was a need to speak up on behalf of those who were no longer able:

I think the thing that was driving [my daughter to speak with the media] was that there were dead people that weren't going to talk to the media. And she was pretty close to some . . . and she felt that responsibility and I think those of us that could, would. (C1-15-15)

Another Columbine student felt some students at the school were not being accurately portrayed and thought the record needed to be put straight:

I often heard stuff about the Trenchcoat Mafia [the name a loose-knit group of Columbine students had adopted for themselves], who I had friends in. And they would always go on about how they were some evil gang, and I heard that multiple times. I thought they were just stupid for saying that or that they must not have very good sources. (C5-4-19)

Other informants felt the responsibility to seek the truth and an understanding of why the senseless tragedy occurred.

Truth was a major theme. On the one hand, many informants questioned the numerous inaccuracies in the information the news media disseminated. They knew from first-hand experience how the media could misrepresent facts and situations. For example, an informant injured in the Columbine shooting was surprised to read in the *Rocky Mountain News* that he could not talk or was having difficulty speaking; the news writer presumably made that assumption based on the fact the student's jaw had been shattered (C10-15-1). "He'd been talk-talk-talk-talking ever since he came out of the anesthesia at the hospital. . . . So it was, that's not true, and that's not true, and that's not true. So they twist things" (C9-14-18).

Truth was an even larger issue in cases where informants believed public officials were distorting or covering up the truth for their own purposes. In the case of the

Oklahoma City bombing, many people do not believe all the people responsible for the attack have been brought to justice. “Another question I’ve been asking for years now is how much did the government know about this? Had they been warned and did they just ignore it?” (O7-2-16). This informant would have believed the government had done a comprehensive and objective investigation. However, evidence she has learned about, largely through the news media, has caused her to question what really went on in April 1995. A lot is at stake in this issue:

O7:           The truth—how else are you gonna get the truth out without the news media?

Researcher:   I think a lot of people would be surprised to hear the vehemence, the way you say that: that if we didn’t have the media, we wouldn’t know the truth.

O7:           We wouldn’t. And like I said, here lately, so much has come in about these groups. And the American people need to know about these people. I don’t think Oklahoma City was the end. I believe Oklahoma City was the beginning. (O7-30-16)

In Colorado, too, some informants believe the news media have served to help ensure public officials are held accountable for mistakes made in relation to the Columbine shooting.

Here is what I don’t like about the whole media thing. Our school, the administration, the sheriff’s department, has done nothing but put down the media. They don’t want us talking to the media. They don’t want the truth out, and so they have done a smear campaign and they have turned the kids against the media and they have turned the parents against the media and they have done a good job. So everyone *hates* the media in this town. (C7-12-16)

Another informant who is a Columbine parent agreed that many elements are hostile not only to media, but also to any outsiders. “If you go to the school, they’ll meet you on the sidewalk within two seconds with security. The media is off-limits. The media is bad! Bad people! These are bad people. Visitors—bad people. We don’t need

visitors” (C1-10-6). This informant shared an anecdote about how he has tried to support the new media outlets’ efforts to confront the Columbine issue directly if it will help reveal what really happened and further productive dialogue. One question for many people is whether there was a third gunman.

One of the controversies in people’s minds that still haven’t sorted it out, and don’t believe the police and stuff, is that they think there was a third killer in a white shirt. No, there wasn’t a third killer. They just carried their black slickers in because that’s what they loaded with their armaments. When they got in, they took off the heavy coat with all the pipe bombs and stuff. So there was a killer in a white shirt. And two in black. It was the same people. And that photograph in the Rocky Mountain News [from the cafeteria security video camera] [snaps his finger]—there’s proof! The truth. So anything the media has that can share the truth. I don’t know what it is they think we can’t handle. (C1-20-4)

Opportunity. One method of coping with tragedy or even symbolically rising above it is to turn the negative into a positive or to use the tragedy as a catalyst for change and understanding. Informants who had lost loved ones—or had come close—felt especially strong about the need for them to help ensure what happened to them did not happen needlessly again. “I know it’s part of my healing to say I can’t just sit back and say I didn’t do anything about it—five or ten years from now” (C1-34-18), one Columbine parent said. One person with a message or idea may not have much impact sharing his or her ideas interpersonally. The media, however, offer a means for people to reach out to others, facilitate dialogue and communication, and effect actual change.

We’re looking for hope in little bits and pieces because we can’t do anything about the bad of April 20th [1999]. The only thing that’s left is the good that can come of it. Can we bring any good out of this horror? Well, yeah! Because there are people that are talking to each other about issues. And there is some good that’s happening. And I think the families of the victims . . . they’re never going to get their child back, [but] if something positive is happening in memory of their child, that gives them a piece of something. And that’s what we’re working on, a lot of us. (C1-42-6)



Memorializing victims is one approach. The most common objective or mission is to help prevent a reoccurrence of the tragedy. A message from one family member of an Oklahoma City bombing victim was to remember that while organizations may be symbolic of many things, ultimately organizations are people, not ideologies.

I think I wanted everybody to know and to think about it. Like, look! These people [anti-government cells] looked at the government as something ethereal, that they could make some kind of attack at. But it's really people. People! . . . There's a lot of anger out there, misdirected anger. If you spot it, do something about it! You know? Do something about it." (O3-30-15)

This same informant said that in her research she had found that the membership in so-called survivalist and questionable militia groups had actually increased following the Murrah Building bombing (O3-18-12).

Support. If there was one outcome that all informants agreed upon, it was the capacity for the exemplification process to result in overwhelming support for those dealing with a major news events. The support came in many forms, but the most tangible was in outpourings of support from total strangers around the world.

And people sent in so many wonderful things, you know, the teddy bears and flowers—I got flowers from Ireland and Hawaii and all these different places just because it [the Oklahoma City bombing] touched people. . . . And knowing that was important. It was comforting. (O3-18-1)

One informant described how if the media mentioned any needs of Oklahoma City rescuers or citizens, that people and businesses around the country immediately responded whether it was food supplies or little angel pins (O4-9-3). The situation provided a needed lighter side to the tragedy of the Murrah Building and the anguishing work to be done in the aftermath:

The pin in my watch broke one day, and I had to tape it together so it would hold. . . . One day I was talking to someone and they said, "What's wrong with your watch there, Captain?" And I said, "Well, the pin broke so I have it taped together." And he said, "Well, for God's sakes, don't tell the media because if

you do, there will be a truckload of 'em here tomorrow!" So we kind of laughed over that. (O4-10-1)

One family's basement is full of cards, letters, and all kinds of memorabilia or gestures of concern people sent while the father was held hostage in Lebanon.

But the basement is just full. . . . And there were letters and gifts and everything. . . . It showed him that when you go through something, you don't go through it alone. . . . But I think the media plays a big part of that, and you have to see that even if you're going through something, that the media can be a tremendous outlet, if you will. Connection [with other people]. (H2-39-7)

Healing. Some informants felt the media helped facilitate healing, both on an individual and community level. One informant from Colorado said Clement Park and the media encampment there was a resource for many students who otherwise may not have known how to begin processing their grief.

The next day in Clement Park when [my daughter] was being interviewed, it started out before the sun came up with just a few dozen kids and a few hundred reporters. By three o'clock in the afternoon, there were a few hundred kids and a few hundred reporters, and everybody was almost one-on-one with somebody to talk to. But people realized that's where the media was and they were coming in, and trickling in, and it already started a healing process for some people. (C1 12 2)

A journalist who covered the Columbine shooting (after finding out her family member who was a student there had gotten out safely) had a similar perspective.

In a sense, it's almost like a grieving process that you go through, and we just fit in with it in the stages of what people are going through. . . . I have always felt, as a journalist, that we're part psychologist. Because we're there to listen to people, and that's what I think a good therapist would do, I think, is listen. And we're nonjudgmental. Totally. Because we're not judging what they do or what they've done, we're just taking it all down and we're letting them talk. (C6-9-21)

The outpouring of support was critical in one returning hostage's healing and well-being.

His homecoming and the fact that people cared was probably the biggest part of his coming back normal or coming back with a relative sense of being. . . . It

made it almost worthwhile. It almost validated somehow how much he'd suffered and people did care that he'd suffered. You know? And that somehow makes thing okay. (H2-33-14)

While media and the coverage news media outlets provide may be a source of healing for some, others disagreed. One Columbine parent said the ongoing coverage makes it difficult to move on from victim to survivor.

I think maybe it just needs to be left alone. It's like we have a wound and keep picking at the scab. And you pick, and pick, and pick and it doesn't have a chance to heal. It needs to heal. . . . There's a point in time when you have to let it heal. (C3-9-20)

Fairness. In news coverage of an event, survivors and family members spoke of looking for fairness in the coverage. Whether people chose to give interviews or not, everybody associated with an event has a story that needs to be acknowledged, if not told. In almost all events, some individuals or groups seem to be left out or their experiences, contributions, or losses glossed over. For example, following the Oklahoma City bombing, some informants felt the daycare center victims and their families received a disproportionate amount of coverage. One informant who lost an adult relative felt that the media had certain stories—and exemplars—it favored.

I wasn't a high-profile story. Pretty redheaded girl, you know, who lost her two babies or the pretty one who lost—mostly it was mothers who lost children. . . . That was rough! But you don't love someone less the longer you know them. (O3-24-17)

Another informant who was among many military personnel who contributed to search and rescue operations felt these contributions were overlooked by the media. "I think I was disappointed that out of all the media coverage that I saw, never once was the military shown" (O1-9-11). This informant's frustration with the media was best represented when he looked over a poster made to honor rescuers.

They had firemen, and the iron workers, and the Red Cross volunteers, and all these people . . . but I didn't see a single person in uniform in that picture . . . and there were hundreds of us down there. And when I finally got down to the bottom of the corner, there was the dog drinking out of his water bowl. And I thought, "How nice that they could put the dog in there but they didn't put any of us military people in there." (O1-9-15)

Informants associated with hostage incidents also experienced a disparity in coverage. The family of one hostage who was killed in captivity was happy when so many hostages returned home safely to their families, but said the media coverage often upset her by failing to acknowledge the plight of others.

I found myself personally . . . a little bit hurt and angry during much of this, especially towards the end when [Associated Press reporter] Terry Anderson, one of their own, got so much attention. Every article, at the end of every article they seemed to throw in a "Terry Anderson is the longest held hostage." It was almost like it was a rule that they were required to add that in there, and maybe AP was in fact. But they never added in, "And \_\_\_\_ was murdered." And I always felt like, well, if they're gonna say Terry Anderson, they need to refer to another pretty important milestone. (H5-64-21)

Other hostages nicknamed themselves "the forgotten hostages" during their captivity in Lebanon because of the attention focused on the plight of Terry Anderson or the Church of England envoy, Terry Waite. It was very unusual for them to hear their names in the news broadcasts they were sometimes able to hear over a short wave radio.

I didn't hear anything about me, and when I met up with [my family] in Wiesbaden, I said, you know, on the radio and even on the TV after we got back, we heard all kinds of things about Terry Anderson, because he was a journalist. And we heard a lot of stuff about Terry Waite, because he was a Church of England guy, and he was a big name, and all of that, but heard nothing about me [or the others]. As far as I was aware, we were forgotten men. (H1-11-19)

As demoralizing as that forgotten feeling was in captivity, the informant later found out just how wrong he had been and how much he and the cause of his freedom had been championed by family, friends, neighbors, and professional colleagues.

Following the Columbine shooting, individuals, families, and other groups, too, felt that their experiences were not always acknowledged or respected. One family who chose to remain fairly private after their son was injured in the shooting acknowledged the trade-offs inherent in every decision such as that (C9-2-10). The benefits included being able to focus on their son and his medical needs. For the son, it later helped him feel more comfortable back at school again. “I think it’s better that way, just because I’m not set apart and pitied more than anybody else—not put on a pedestal in any way” (C11-12-21). The down side to their decision was that most people do not understand how serious their son’s injuries were and how hard he has had to work on his recovery.

C9 (mother): And he has a lot left to do. . . . This is an ongoing thing for the rest of his life, too. . . . So it’s kind of like, I think he feels like he has been kind of shorted a little bit. Does that make sense?

Researcher: Yeah, that people don’t recognize . . . that you were able to get yourself to medical attention, and get yourself help, which that in itself seemed miraculous.

C11 (son): Well, that doesn’t really bother me too much because . . . it was a natural tendency to get out of there . . . it’s instinct. I don’t think my separate personality has anything to do with it. But I think just the way I see this, the fact that I’m not recognized is [pause] . . .”

Researcher: Having been as affected as profoundly as you have been?

C11: Yeah. Like the kid that I was with. I mean, he’s kind of under the microscope now. I don’t think I want it to that extent, but I would like at least some recognition, some . . .

Researcher: Of how far back you’ve come?

C11: Yeah.

C9: So that’s the down side of not—but then, you think, “Okay, do you want everybody in on that anyway?” And I don’t know, it’s hard.

Researcher: Trying to find that balance.

C9: Yeah. Because he doesn't want people to know that-you want to be treated normal anyway, so it's kind of like, can you have both?  
(C9-8-16)

Informants acknowledged that some people may be glory hounds or looking for their 15 minutes of fame, but in these cases, it appeared to be more a simple case of wanting the respect that they and their circumstances were due.

## CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The story of Jonesboro reminds us that news affects everyone—journalists, government officials and the public. When examined through the prism of fairness, the media's performance in Jonesboro can provide lessons for everyone as well.

Freedom Forum (1998, p. 37)

### Summary

The current lack of empirical data and understanding in the area of the exemplification process has had the effect of putting the news media, the public, and often the participants in news happenings at odds. Even if an exemplar has not been brutalized by the media (the so-called "second victimization," according to the National Center for Crime Victims), public opinion is likely to be highly critical of the news media and their practices. Richard Stolley, senior editorial advisor at Time, Inc., wrote, "every story about another human being is in one sense an invasion of that person's privacy. Circumstances and cooperation, if any, determine how invasive it is" (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 1997, The Diana Effect). This study sought to move beyond quick and easy evaluative judgments of the exemplification process into a more complete understanding of the outcomes on those most directly affected. In turn, this study has generated some areas to explore which may facilitate and improve cooperation between exemplars and news media representatives to meet the seemingly contradictory needs of all.

As indicated by numerous polls cited earlier, Americans generally assume that media are overly aggressive, ambitious, insensitive, and intrusive when covering a crisis. The news business is, after all, extremely competitive. In most cases, the informants had personal knowledge or experience of media personnel behaving at their worst. Examples ranged from reporters intimidating exemplars to obtain an interview to making insensitive and highly offensive comments (like Howard Stern making jokes about the Columbine students fleeing the school with their hands behind their heads as if criminals who were themselves being apprehended). Most informants, however, even those with painful negative experiences with the media, resisted branding all with the same critical brush. And most informants related examples of media members' laudable behavior: acts of compassion and instances of moral and in-kind support. Perhaps the first and foremost finding of this study is reinforcing the common sense idea that sweeping generalizations are rarely useful.

Beyond that, the experience of informants who were exemplars suggests a new view of exemplar-journalist relations may be appropriate. Before summarizing a framework which may be useful in better understanding exemplification, one reminder is in order. The people who shared their experiences for this study had in common the fact that they were unexpectedly victims, survivors, or family members of victims and survivors in happenings that they essentially had nothing to do with bringing about. In seeking out their stories, media then were looking for the human interest and eyewitness accounts, and were not pursuing adversarial story angles, i.e., examining factors of culpability and accountability. The following summary only seeks to help explain and understand situations resembling the former.



### Toward a Theory of Exemplification

People determine the degree of self-disclosure they can tolerate comfortably based on socialization, personal values, and most importantly perhaps, the dictates of the situation at hand. The informants in this study defined their front and backstage areas quite differently. Some people wanted to keep their family and their situation out of public view. Others were comfortable opening physical spaces such as their home to journalists (and thus also to media audiences) and self-disclosing in some depth. Whatever boundaries individuals and families set for themselves, informants in this study all indicated that their expectations of personal privacy were met.

Informants made some finer distinctions, however, that the general public may not consider as carefully when characterizing media behavior. First, informants recognized that news coverage was intrusive. As Webster's defines intrusive, media often forced themselves on the community when they were not welcome. In the macro sense, the media came to Oklahoma City and South Jefferson County (Littleton) en masse. At the micro level, media representatives intruded upon families and individuals by overwhelming phone lines, ringing doorbells, and photographing places of high emotion. The very presence of the media was intrusive in that it further disrupted people's sense of "normal." However, informants seemed to be able to tolerate the intrusiveness. They understood that circumstances and public interest drew media to the scene (indeed, informants would be interested in similar events happening elsewhere) and that media had a job to do there.

While acknowledging the media presence was intrusive, informants in their experience did not go so far as to characterize it as invasive, a greater violation of privacy (intrusion being to invasion what manslaughter is to first degree murder). The media

individually and collectively were a nuisance and an added stressor, but for the most part, the behavior of media members remained within the bounds informants had set. This did not mean informants judged that the media respected everyone else's boundaries. For example, many media audience members felt the media "crossed the line" with the interview with the emotionally distraught Columbine High School student Bree Pasquale. She and her family, however, did not.

The process of exemplification was marked more by collaboration than exploitation. This finding is based on how control was signified in relations between informants and members of the media. Informants who were inundated with media requests recognized they had something of value to journalists; this gave them some degree of power. Journalists certainly understood this as well. In consenting to interviews, informants applied their power by setting guidelines for their encounter (e.g., "Here is what I am willing to talk about . . .") and influencing the outcome (e.g., "This is the message we need to get across . . ."). Journalists were far from powerless themselves. Informants were cautious in media encounters knowing that through editing and presentation, the media would always have the last word. As long as a balance of power existed, it was advantageous to both exemplars and journalists to collaborate and cooperate.

Power is a fluid concept, and changes with the circumstances. The power that informants had was time-perishable due to the short life cycle of news (new stories quickly supplant the old) and factors of supply and demand (over time, media may have reached story saturation and found more exemplars than they need). At what is arguably their most vulnerable time, however, when first confronting an epic crisis or life-

changing event, people generally have the most power in relation to news media representatives.

Another approach to analyzing power in the exemplification process is by applying French and Raven's bases of power model (Raven, 1993). French and Raven posited six bases of power (coercion, reward, legitimacy, expert, referent, and informational) for inducing potential behavior in others. Two of the bases—reward and legitimacy power—may be at work in news media and exemplar interactions.

News media representatives and organizations have a variety of rewards they can offer exemplars for compliance (providing an interview). These range from status (celebrity from being featured in coverage or the novelty of being taken to a news studio in a limousine) to providing the platform from which an exemplar can convey a message or raise awareness of a personally important issue.

Legitimacy power may assist journalists in situations where potential exemplars believe in the role and contributions of a free press in a democracy. Such exemplars may have internalized principles such as the "public's right to know" and the importance of the First Amendment. People with these values may be easier to convince to become a player in the process.

Raven points out that the six bases of power in their many combinations remain volitional. That is, targets of influence still have the power to decide whether to comply or "leave the field." Nonvolitional methods of influence such as force or manipulation could be defined as exploitive. Informants did not perceive in their experience that journalists and newsgatherers resorted to these means.

Findings from this study challenge the firmly held belief that journalists, in covering news stories, are outsiders looking in. In many cases, journalists become participants in the story by virtue of being brokers of information. This assertion has implications for the construct of journalistic objectivity but also acknowledges that reporters can be very much emotionally involved in a story even while reporting it dispassionately and in a nonjudgmental manner. This finding is analogous to the premise of the active interview in social science research that holds knowledge is created and changed in the very act of seeking it.

The meanings and outcomes informants attributed to their experience and interactions with the media are best summed up in the philosophy and words of an informant associated with Columbine: it is a burden, a responsibility, and an opportunity. Exemplification is a burden because it takes time and carries risks. Several family members mentioned resenting the hours media interactions took away from precious family time. Risks of exemplification included receiving hate mail from people who held conflicting views on events. Exemplification is a responsibility in several ways. It entails witnessing for those who can no longer speak for themselves such as the many “good people” who perished in the Oklahoma City bombing. Exemplification is a responsibility, too, to people whose story is told and who care deeply that the story is told “right.” Exemplification offers opportunity as well. In the case of tragedy, to somehow make profound loss bearable, many people strive to ensure the same thing does not happen again to other people. People interact with the media in an effort to make some good come of something that was very, very bad.

### Lessons for Journalists, Intermediaries, and Potential Exemplars

One goal of this study was to identify areas for improvement or to suggest techniques that might improve the exemplification process, that is, make it more productive and less hurtful. In the following section, the researcher offers lessons learned and recommendations based on the study as a whole and from individual informants.

#### For Journalists

When in doubt, put moral obligations before professional obligations. A professional sacrifice in the short term (walking away from the chance of a defining exemplar account or iconic image) may be much better in the long run (maintain a sense of self-respect, maintain career satisfaction, raise the regard of journalists in society). Recognize the potential that emotional trauma may be just as life-threatening as physical trauma.

The media as an institution needs to find a means to reward journalists who behave professionally (i.e., in accordance with the many existing codes of ethics) and to punish or castigate newsgatherers who do not. The perception (and perhaps the reality) of journalism today is that nice guys do indeed finish last. For example, when was the last time a reporter or news organization was publicly commended or reaped a public relations gain for “doing the right thing?” It happens, but not often enough. One approach may be to continue the process established following the Jonesboro, Arkansas, school shooting in 1998 whereby outside observers hosted town meetings to get public feedback on the media’s performance. These could provide occasions for praising responsible journalists (without the career field appearing to be too self-congratulatory) and criticizing questionable or offensive practices. Just as it is almost an established

news convention to revisit sites of news events on significant anniversaries, it could become convention to critique how media performed in noteworthy cases. In this way, the industry may put some backbone into self-reform efforts while socializing media audiences not to accept the lowest common denominator as a standard for journalistic practice. In time, it may serve to lessen public backlash against media which seems to have become a regular occurrence following major news events.

Much of the anger and resentment expressed by informants in this study was related more to how the news was reported than how the news was collected. Speculation and editorializing are not victimless offenses. Both as news consumers and exemplars, informants were very cognizant of how people's words are taken out of context. Some informants had the perception or very real sense that journalists had already written their stories and were just filling in the blanks with the sound bites they were just now in the process of providing. Sound bites and teasers taken out of context have the potential to be particularly offensive. Playing fast and loose with context should be taken as seriously as an error in fact. The news media appear to have gone as far as they can go in shortening print and broadcast news stories without stripping them totally of meaning. It may be time for media to restore context to audience members, especially regarding sound bites and quotations from exemplars.

Many informants commented on how it was not just the interpersonal contact they had with reporters that was at times burdensome, but also the sheer size of the media corps that sprouted in their community. Do 1,000 news media representatives really cover a major news story better than 100? One of the Freedom Forum's evaluations of the news coverage of the Jonesboro school shootings was that the relatively small local paper *by itself* provided comprehensive, hard-hitting, and sensitive news coverage of the

tragedy (Freedom Forum, 1998). It may be time for news organizations to take a “less is more” approach to news events not only in the interest of reducing newsgathering budgets, but for the well-being of the people and communities subject to the intense media focus.

#### For Intermediaries

Virtually every informant in this study related examples of how third parties provided important assistance and helped them maintain a sense of control. Despite prevailing cultural norms to “leave families in peace” or to “respect families’ privacy,” more often than not, it appears likely that offers of professional assistance and counsel could be very helpful in families’ ability to get through these challenging times. Many people have contacts who can help to some extent in this regard, e.g. ministers, funeral directors, hospital administrators, and friends and relatives who work in communications industries. If third parties offer assistance and individuals or families accept, it is critically important that third parties ensure they enable the family to call the shots and direct any actions taken on their behalf. The bottom line is intermediaries should not presume how a family feels about the media nor presume necessarily whether or how a family “wants to be protected.” Let the family decide. This study suggested that families who addressed this issue early on felt they handled the situation in a positive manner.

#### For Potential Exemplars

In the past, “putting one’s affairs in order” mainly referred to drafting a will. Today, however, people’s personal affairs are more complex and require more advance planning. Informants offered some advice to people who may one day be the focus of intense media interest.

First, people need to recognize they have control in the situation, but they need to also understand the importance of maintaining that control. Being in control means knowing what rights you have and how to exercise them. For example, “You don’t have to talk to them, because the press will make you think that you have to talk to them. It’s their God-given privilege that you talk to ‘em! . . . And you don’t. You can always say no” (H4-69-15). Another informant said what is good is, “being in control, having a plan, understanding the requirements of the media and trying to meet their requirements but keeping your own requirements in the forefront” (H5-30-11). Having a family spokesperson helps maintain control by giving media an official source to focus on as well as enabling the family a buffer zone of privacy.

Second, get media training as quickly as possible. Hostages returning from Iran recognized the efficacy in this, and asked one of their fellow hostages with media experience to brief the others on rights and responsibilities (H3-51-22). One informant arranged to go through a one-week intensive media training course as soon as possible (H5-3-13). Whatever else informants did not learn on their own, they learned from reporters (H2-12-4). Journalists appear very willing to initiate newcomers into the talk (e.g., the conditions of talking “off the record” or “on deep background”) and practices of the business (asking for multiple takes, bridging techniques for redirecting the focus of a question, etc.).

Finally, always be cautious with the media. “You find they pick and choose things out of there, and what you’re saying [in a news report] isn’t necessarily what you’re meaning” (H2-8-11).



### Implications for Further Research

Results from this study may serve as a foundation for continuing research on the exemplification experience using a variety of research approaches. This study focused on three major news events which occurred within one, five, and around 10 or more years ago. A similar study might perhaps be conducted longitudinally, focusing on exemplars from one event, but looking at meanings and interpretations ascribed to the event and media experience at various time intervals.

Conducting similar studies in international settings (e.g., interviewing exemplars in various countries) may increase understanding of the role culture and societal norms play in the exemplification experience. One might expect English informants in a culture legendary for its citizens' "stiff upper lip" to assign quite different meanings to the exemplification experience than say informants from Spain or Italy where emotion, stereotypically, at least, is more freely expressed. How do experiences vary between countries like America with deep penetration of news media programming (where exemplars-to-be will have witnessed thousands of exemplar episodes in news programming before undergoing the experience themselves) and third world countries (where exposure to exemplar episodes may be far more limited)? How might various political systems and media ownership structures affect exemplars' interpretations of their experience? For example, how free do exemplars feel in expressing their thoughts, with what effect on the overall experience?

A study using conversation analysis could corroborate or contradict findings from this study. Exemplars may express a feeling of controlling or not controlling the exemplification process and interview. Actual interviews recorded on video and audiotape could be analyzed for patterns of control and signification of power to see if

exemplars' perceptions of the interview episode were accurate. Repeated findings of reporter dominance in these exchanges could lead to findings of media exploitation. On the other hand, exchanges characterized more by meaning making and the give and take of power in the relationship could substantiate news media representatives' self-perception of reporters as compassionate and empathetic, and the relationship as collaborative.

Finally, in this study, informants provided abundant anecdotal evidence that challenged the widely held ideal that journalists are objective observers and generally just report on—but do not influence—the subjects they cover. One informant even went so far as to wonder how the experiencing of covering her family's emotional story over the period of several years changed the reporter. While the news media industry is infamous for the degree of competition in the business and how that in turn affects the way coverage is conducted, informants cited numerous examples of journalists' mutual cooperation in covering the story. Informants also described a surprising number of instances where journalists and media managers subjugated competitive considerations to issues of human decency. An ethnography of journalists at work on the scene of a major news event may produce findings of a "Journalist's Code" in the tradition of Wieder's work explicating the "Convict Code" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Such a study may reveal how, when, and under what conditions structures of media cooperation and competition are built up and then supplanted. An ethnography of journalists also may provide a more accurate view of the people involved in telling the story of a news event and may document the timing and conditions associated with public backlash against media presence and involvement in an event.

APPENDIX A  
LONG INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

1. Can you describe how this event unfolded for you (and your family)? (Depending on informant and interview particulars, it may be more appropriate to lead in with a summary of the precipitating events and ask if that's the informant's understanding.)
2. Tell me about your experience, if any, with news media representatives during this time.
3. How were you (and your family) approached? (How did media find and contact you?)
4. How did you feel news media representatives acted toward you? How did you feel toward them? Who was in control of the process (and what made you feel so)?
5. Many people might wonder what it was you were thinking or feeling at that time such that you were willing to interact with journalists . . .
6. What was your experience of the coverage? How did you feel? What happened when your story was publicized? What was your experience of other coverage of the event?
7. What would you say to others about the news coverage experience who may face a similar situation? If you could do things over again, what might you do differently?
8. As you look back on this event, were your expectations of privacy met?
9. What other interaction have you had with news media members? Can you elaborate?

APPENDIX B  
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
INFORMED CONSENT RELEASES AND CHILD ASSENT SCRIPT FOR  
INFORMANT PARTICIPATION

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: PRINCIPAL MEMBER

My name is Anne Morris and I am a doctoral student at the University of Florida. I am doing a research study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. I am interested in how people understand these interactions and what meanings this experience holds for them. My work will be supervised by my professor, Dr. Linda C. Hon, of the College of Journalism and Communications. It will be used to fulfill partial research requirements for my degree.

You are invited to participate in this study as I try to learn from the public most directly affected by news media interviews. If you agree to participate, I will interview you on at least one occasion. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and conducted at your home (or other location that is agreeable to you). During that interview, which will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half, you will be asked to talk about how you came to be interviewed by the news media and what effect that experience has had on you and your significant others. Any subsequent interviews will be scheduled with you at your convenience, will last less than an hour, and will most likely be conducted over the phone at researcher expense. If needed, a follow-on interview would be conducted to clarify specific thoughts and comments from the original in-person interview. You will not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Although the interview(s) will be audio-taped and combined with interviews of other exemplars, the tapes will be coded so that your privacy is protected. The code sheets and tapes will be kept in secure storage at the University of Florida and will be erased within one year of completion of the project. Only Dr. Hon and I will have access to these tapes and their codes and transcriptions. These interviews will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law.

The interview data will be combined with other interviews so that specific information will not be tied to you or your family. When the report is completed, you will have the opportunity to see it and discuss it with me if you wish. My hope is that this research will benefit you in seeing how your experience compares to others who have faced similar situations. It may also better inform journalism educators, news media practitioners, legislators, and crisis intervention personnel on the news media interview experience as they develop, review and revise policy in this area.

If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Linda Hon in the College of Journalism and Communications at (352) 392-1686. Any concerns about your rights as a participant may be directed to: UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250. Your decision to participate or not participate will not prejudice your relations with the University of Florida in any way. If you decide to participate, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without consequence.

.....

I agree to voluntarily participate in the study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. My signature indicates that I have read the procedure described and I have received a copy of this description. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview procedure. There are no anticipated risks for me. I will not be compensated for participation. I do not have to answer any questions that I do not wish to answer, and I may withdraw my participation without prejudice at any time after signing this form.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a copy of the final "interview" manuscript submitted to the instructor. \_\_\_\_\_

UFIRB Project # 1999-788

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION OF MINOR (Age 16 or over)

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Anne Morris and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. I am doing a research study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. I am interested in how people understand these interactions and what meanings this experience holds for them. My work will be supervised by my professor, Dr. Linda C. Hon, of the College of Journalism and Communications. It will be used to fulfill partial research requirements for my degree.

I would like permission for your child(ren) to participate in a research study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. Participation would involve an in-depth interview of approximately an hour to an hour and a half with your child(ren) during which he/she (they) would be asked to talk about how they came to be interviewed by the news media and what effect they feel that experience has had in their lives. Neither you nor other family members would hear the child's (children's) interviews, tapes, or see transcripts of the tapes. The interview would be audio-taped, however no one other than me or my supervisor, Dr. Linda C. Hon at the University of Florida, would have access to the tapes or transcripts. There is no expected risk in participating, although recalling circumstances surrounding a memorable event can sometimes be an emotional experience (however, a great amount of psychological literature supports the benefit to people in sharing their experiences). I will be the interviewer, and the focus will be on news media-related happenings, and not on the newsworthy event itself. As with any interview, your child's (children's) participation is voluntary. He/she (they) is (are) free to withdraw consent at any time without consequences even after this permission is given.

My hope is that this research will benefit you and your family and your child(ren) in seeing how your experience compares to others who have faced similar situations. It may also better inform journalism educators, news media practitioners, legislators, and crisis intervention personnel on the news media interview experience as they develop, review and revise policy in this area.

If you decide to give permission for your child(ren) to participate, I will discuss the research with the child and obtain his/her (their) verbal consent.

If you have any questions, you may contact me or Dr. Linda Hon in the College of Journalism and Communications at (352) 392-1686. Any concerns about you or your child's rights as participants may be directed to: UFIRB Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250. Your decision to consent or not consent to your child's (children's) participation will not prejudice your relations with the University of Florida in any way. If you decide to consent to participation, you are completely free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without consequence.

.....

My child(ren) is (are) allowed to voluntarily participate in this study of people who have been interviewed by the news media following an unexpected newsworthy event. I understand the nature of the requested participation and have received a copy of this explanation. There is no anticipated risk to the child(ren). He/she (they) may withdraw at any time without consequences. Moreover, I may withdraw my consent for his/her (their) participation at any time without consequences. The child(ren) will not be compensated for participating in this research.

Parent/Guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

UFIRB # 1999-788

Minor Child Assent Script

My name is Anne Morris, and I'm a student at the University of Florida. Your [mother/father/parents] said I could ask you if you would talk to me about what things were like for you after [news event].

It would help me to hear what your experience was like. But you wouldn't have to answer anything you don't want to, and what you tell me will be between you and me—your [mother/father/parents] said that was okay with them. And if you want stop, we can stop—just let me know. Does this sound like something you would help me with?

[Wait for sign from child to continue.]

I'm going to use this tape machine to record what we talk about so I don't have to take notes, if that's okay with you. I'd like to know what it was like for you and what you think about [event]. I'd like to ask you 10 or 15 questions, but again, we can stop when you want. Is it okay with you to go on?

[Wait for child assent.]

APPENDIX C  
SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT



1 Interview #20  
2 23 January 2000 – 1430 -  
3 Researcher: Anne R. Morris  
4 Names of victims, survivors, and family members have been replaced with pseudonyms  
5 in the following transcript in the interest of privacy.  
6  
7 O7: . . . I'm supposed to start on a book.

8 R: Something you initiated, or is it someone who's come to you and said . . .

9 O7: I've had several people come to me about doing a book. As I was saying, when I  
10 saw Timothy McVeigh, I just – I couldn't believe that Americans would do that.  
11 And then I started paying attention to what was going on in this country, as far as  
12 the Neo-Nazis and the white supremacists and I think I've read everything I can  
13 find on them. I watch TV, in fact, this past weekend on, um, I think it was Friday  
14 night, uh, the Discovery Channel had a, um, documentary on, um, American Nazis,  
15 and I've ordered that video. And then Sunday, no I guess it was Saturday, it was  
16 Saturday, Court TV had, no – one was on, one was American Nazis and the other  
17 one was the Christian Identity. So I've ordered both videos and – I don't know  
18 what I'm gonna do with them – but if I can just get one or two people to sit down  
19 and watch these videos, find out what's going on this country, that it doesn't seem  
20 like to me anybody's doing anything about! It's like, ignore 'em and they'll go  
21 away. Well, they're not going away! They're here. And they're getting' bigger,  
22 and bigger, and bigger! And I don't think our government should allow people like  
23 that to go around, threatening people, *killing* people, just because they're different!  
24 I take it very personally because I am black. And I think that's where some of my  
25 anger comes from, because these people *are* racist and they are allowed to do just  
26 whatever. We have 'em in Oklahoma. I think in 1996 and '97 I heard on the news  
27 where there were 16 groups in Oklahoma!

- 1 R: That's scary, isn't it?
- 2 O7: It is scary! You don't know, you don't know who you're sitting beside on the bus,  
3 you don't know who you're working beside, and it's scary.
- 4 R: But you said what can we do? I mean, we can make people aware of it. We can let  
5 people know that we think that's pathetic.
- 6 O7: That's right. We had the Black Panthers, we had the Liberation – what was it, the  
7 Liberation Army or something like that? This was way back in the '60s. And the  
8 government got rid of them. Before they got so big. The government got rid of  
9 them. Why didn't they get rid of these people before they got so big? I think it's  
10 like 500,000 of 'em now? Something like that I heard on TV recently? That's a lot  
11 of people.
- 12 R: Not all – that's one of the things I'm not quite sure, how you go on. I mean, you  
13 suffer a loss and you would like to think that there's some good that you can  
14 eventually, somehow pull out of that, but it looks like you're kind of, um, I would  
15 think it's harder for you now today, the more you learn. . . .
- 16 O7: It is.
- 17 R: . . . the more anger.
- 18 O7: The more anger, I, um – and then another question was, that I've been asking for  
19 years now, is how much did the government know about this? Had they been  
20 warned and did they just ignore it? Now, I've heard people say the government  
21 blew up the building. No, I don't believe that. I will never believe the government  
22 blew up the building, for what reason? But I found out last week that some part of  
23 the government *had* been warned.
- 24 R: Was that the ATF?

- 1 O7: Yes, the ATF in Tulsa. Had been warned, and they did *nothing*.
- 2 R: Let me back up a little bit, if you don't mind -- are these your grandsons?
- 3 O7: That's Isaac and Daniel.
- 4 R: They were in the day care center? Were they in the building?
- 5 O7: They were in the day care center.
- 6 R: And is that your son's children?
- 7 O7: Yes. I have four sons, I don't have any daughters, and I had custody of them.
- 8 R: Oh, wow. I know I'm gonna say something stupid here, but it just, um, man. Well,
- 9 let me just start by saying I'm sorry, I'll try and get that out of the way from you.
- 10 'Cause you're [bleah] let me, as I get emotional here, I just want to make sure you
- 11 understand a few things about this interview. First of all, I appreciate your agreeing
- 12 to talk to me and I also want you to know if at any time I ask you something you
- 13 don't want to answer, of course, don't answer it. If at any time you want to stop the
- 14 interview, it's all up to you. What we say will be kept private or confidential.
- 15 What I'll do or what I'm doing with the people I'm interviewing is I'll take all of
- 16 the tapes and I'll transcribe them. And I'll look for what people say on different
- 17 things. I'll start with what *you* all say, and I'll try to make some sense of it. So
- 18 anyway, I won't be attributing things to you unless there's something that's so
- 19 specific to this and I think it would really help people understand, then I would
- 20 come back to you and say, "Can I use this?"
- 21 O7: You can use anything I say.
- 22 R: Okay, I appreciate that.
- 23 O7: I'm not saying anything to you that I haven't said before.

1 R: You know, that's kind of fearless, because on one hand you're saying they're  
2 500,000 really awful people out there, in our own country, and on the other hand  
3 you're saying you're not afraid of them.

4 O7: No.

5 R: The other thing is the research that I'm doing again is to try and go to the people  
6 who have been most affected by these profound losses, profound events, and ask  
7 them what role--the good, bad, and the ugly about the media coverage. How it's  
8 helped, how it's hurt, and just the impact on you and your family. So I also want to  
9 mention I'd like to send you a transcript of our interview so you can have it for your  
10 family. And also, if you're interested in the research, I'd be happy to send you a  
11 copy of what I'm able to make sense of. In fact, I hope to even send it out before  
12 I'm finished so that people can read it and say, "Yeah." Even though it may not be  
13 specific to your case, you can say, "I can understand that. That sounds like there's  
14 some truth there." Or, "I think you missed the boat there." So anyway, you had  
15 custody – did you work in the building?

16 O7: No, I worked in the County Building. I worked for the County Assessor and I lived  
17 about, I lived less than a block from where the Federal Building was. And I worked  
18 2 ½ blocks from where the Federal Building was, so it was convenient for me to  
19 drop the kids off there in the morning and walk on to work. And it was a good day  
20 care center. It was a very good day care center. I didn't worry about the kids in the  
21 day care center there. In fact, I thought they were probably in the most, in the  
22 safest day care center in the city! Because I didn't know about those people that  
23 were so angry at the government, that they wanted to blow up buildings, with  
24 people *in* the buildings. Timothy McVeigh was supposed to have said that he could

1        have blown up the building at night and made a statement to the government, but he  
2        needed a body count. So that's what those people were.

3    R:    So, you dropped Isaac and Daniel off and you were at work, and I assume you  
4        heard the blast and felt it.

5    O7: I heard it and felt it. And I didn't know what it was. See, a week before the  
6        bombing I had gone to the doctor and he had put me on medication because I was  
7        anemic. And I had to take the pills with food, so I dropped the boys off that  
8        morning, a little late because I kept thinking that I shouldn't go to work that day.  
9        For some reason, I had this feeling that I should stay, I should have stayed home.  
10       So, and had I stayed home, I wouldn't have taken them to the day care center. And,  
11       so, I dropped them off a little late and I went on to work. And after everybody got  
12       in the office, I went down to the snack bar to get a croissant so I could eat before I  
13       took that medicine, and I – I worked on the third floor of the County Building, the  
14       snack bar is on the first floor – so I'd just gotten off the elevator and was walking  
15       down the hallway going back to my office, and I heard the explosion. But I heard  
16       two booms. I heard boom-boom. Now, I don't know what that other boom was,  
17       but I heard two. And I just stood there. And I was wondering, you know, what was  
18       that? Because the building was shaking. So, I was standing close to the computer  
19       room – I've never heard computers blow up, so I thought maybe it was, a computer  
20       had blown up, until I started looking up and I saw the tile in the ceiling was just  
21       moving and debris and stuff was just falling out of the ceiling. And I was still  
22       standing there when people started running out of the offices, and somebody said,  
23       "We've got to vacate the building." So I took off running down the steps. I still  
24       had this little box in my hand. I don't know what happened to the box – I had just

1       this little box in my hand, in my hands, because I had gotten stuff for other, for  
2       other coworkers, too. And we ran across the street from the building and were  
3       standing in the parking lot and I looked north and I saw all of this smoke, black  
4       smoke. And where I was looking was toward the building where I lived. Well, in  
5       December of '89 we had a big fire in that building, so I remember asking, "Is it the  
6       Regency?" (I lived at the Regency.) and a male voice behind me said, "No, it's the  
7       Federal Building." So I said, "I've got to go." And one of my coworkers grabbed  
8       my arm, she said, "You don't know if it's the Federal Building or not," and I  
9       remember elbowing her – I said, "I just left my boys up there – I *got* to go!" And  
10      two coworkers took off running with me, and we got up to the building. We ran in  
11      on the south side of the building. The building was still standing on the south side.  
12      Some windows were broken out. I could see people standing in the windows on  
13      some of the upper floors and, uh, the medics were already there and they were  
14      bringing people out, and the people were bleeding, but I still didn't panic because it  
15      didn't look like that much damage had been done. And finally I said to one of the,  
16      my coworkers, I said, "Let's go around to 5<sup>th</sup> Street," and she said okay, so we went  
17      around to 5<sup>th</sup> Street. There was no day care center there. There was no *building*  
18      there. All of the stuff from the building was laying out in the street! The cars in the  
19      parking lot across the street from the Federal Building were on fire, and that's  
20      where all of that smoke was coming from. And I, I remember screaming, thinking  
21      if I can get in that building, I can get the boys out and they're gonna be all right.  
22      And I started across the street to go in the building and this policeman grabbed me  
23      and told me to go back. And, and I kept telling him, "But you don't understand, I  
24      left the boys in there this morning!" and he said, "But you can't go in," and I got

1       very angry with him, and I remember yelling at him, telling him – ‘cause he yelled  
2       at me and I remember yelling at him, telling him, “As long as you live, don’t you  
3       *ever* yell at me again!” And I saw people running. I saw people crying. I saw  
4       people bleeding. Ooohhh, it was awful. But I still didn’t know what had happened.  
5       And sometime later I went back around the south side of the Federal Courthouse,  
6       and I saw this, I guess it was a US Marshal, he was a government agent, I know –  
7       and I asked him what happened. And he told me, he said, “Some son of a bitch left  
8       a bomb in front of the building.” And when he said “bomb” that’s when I  
9       panicked. And, um, I kept running back and forth, I kept thinking. One time I saw  
10      this lady running down the street with this little boy in her arms, a little black boy,  
11      and I thought it was Isaac, and I took off running behind her. But when I got close,  
12      it wasn’t Isaac. I had never seen that little boy.

13    R:    Isaac was the two-year old?

14    O7:   Isaac was the five-year old. And, um, I had never seen that little boy. And that’s  
15       when I remembered there was a day care center at the Y across, up the next block  
16       from the Federal Building.

17    R:    You sounded like you remember . . .

18    O7:   I live this every day.

19    R:    You live it every day.

20    O7:   I live this every day. I hear the explosion every day. I see that building every day.  
21       I see the people running – I never forget. It never leaves me too far, and not for  
22       very long.

23    R:    Do you remember media in that time? It sounds like you must have gotten to the  
24       building within five minutes.

1 O7 It was about, between five and seven minutes after I heard the explosion when I got  
2 to the building.

3 R: And already rescue people were trying to do things . . .

4 O7: The rescue people were already there. Federal agents were already there, and I  
5 know they were federal agents because they had their jackets and they either said  
6 FBI or ATF. Policemen were already there, and, like I said, emergency service was  
7 there. I saw civilian people just going across, taking off their coats, going across  
8 the lines, saying "I want to help." Those are the people that will never be  
9 recognized. I know some of them, and, um, we, um, I don't know how long I  
10 stayed up there, but I was still there when they made us all get back because there  
11 was supposed to be, another bomb in the building. Whether they found another  
12 bomb, I don't know. I've heard two different stories. I've heard they didn't find  
13 another bomb – I've heard they found two other bombs in the building. So . . .

14 R: Do you have any recollection in all of that chaos of media, or feeling like someone,  
15 people were trying to interfere or ask you when you were concerned about your  
16 boys?

17 O7: Not until later on that day. We finally went back to the south of the building, and,  
18 um, was standing out there and I felt somebody pulling on my vest, and I looked  
19 around – it was Mr. Davis. His little boy was in the day care center, and he and  
20 Isaac were very close. His little boy's name is Jeremy. And Mr. Davis was asking  
21 me, "Where's Isaac?" and I kept saying, "I don't know." I guess he, he thought that  
22 wherever Isaac was Jeremy would be there, because they were always together. So,  
23 then, some more of my coworkers came and we, somebody had told us, go to the



1 Sheriff's Department, that we could find out what hospitals they had taken, you  
2 know, the injured to.

3 R: All that was just by word-of-mouth, saying – asking and people sharing.

4 O7: And so we went to St. Anthony Hospital and they didn't have the boys. And they  
5 told us to go to Children's Hospital so we went to Children's Hospital and that's  
6 when Mr. Davis found Jeremy. Jeremy was injured but he was alive. And we  
7 stayed at Children's Hospital, it seemed like to me, all day long, but it couldn't  
8 have been all day long. It had started raining, it had gotten cold, and I had – I  
9 walked out on a little porch-like, and this man came up to me and started talking  
10 and I was smoking a cigarette and he started talking. And I asked him who he was,  
11 and his name was Jeffrey Fleishman. He was a reporter with the *Philadelphia*  
12 *Inquirer*. And that was the first reporter I talked to.

13 R: How did you feel at that time? You had no information – you're at the hospital,  
14 you stayed at the Children's Hospital did you say, maybe because you thought that  
15 was maybe the most likely place, and again, Jeremy had shown up there.

16 O7: Um-hmmm. Well, I hesitated and then I told Jeremy, I mean I told Jeffrey, "Yeah,  
17 I will talk to you," and I talked to him about the boys.

18 R: Did he just ask if you're related? Is that kind of, he just asked who you were or  
19 why you were there?

20 O7: Well, I, I think when I walked out on the porch and he walked out and I said,  
21 "Nobody can tell me where my babies are." So he knew that I had, that was  
22 somebody related to me in that building, you know, when the bomb exploded. And  
23 Jeffrey and I became friends. [pause] I would see Jeffrey over at the church,  
24 'cause you know we – later on that day, we were told to go to First Christian

- 1 Church and that we could get information from there, so it had gotten almost dark,  
2 but I, I don't think it was that late. I think it was because it was raining and cloudy.  
3 And when I walked in the church, the first person I saw was my second son's  
4 mother-in-law. My second son is the one that lives in Kansas, and he had heard  
5 about the bombing. He had called his mother-in-law and told her to go find me,  
6 and so she was there at the church, and the second person I saw was – I had a part-  
7 time job working on weekends. I took care of this retired judge's wife – and I had  
8 called them from the hospital and told them that I couldn't find Isaac and Daniel,  
9 and so they had called their daughter – she's an attorney here in Oklahoma City –  
10 they had called her and told her to find me, so she was at the church. The third  
11 person I saw was Adele Mendies. Her little boy is Henry. Henry was in the day  
12 care center and Alicia was just sitting there, so I walked up to her and I asked her,  
13 "Are you trying to find your baby?" and she said, "My baby's dead." Oh, let me  
14 back up. While I was still at the hospital, Susan Martin and Cindy Shumaker and  
15 Bill Martin came in.
- 16 R: They were David and Monty's family.
- 17 O7: Yeah. And all of a sudden I heard this screaming, and I looked around and it was  
18 Susan, and Bill was holding onto Susan, so I ran over and asked what was wrong,  
19 and they had just found out one of Cindy's little boys, I can't remember which one,  
20 was dead. And then, uh, Beth Sizemore and her family were there, and they left,  
21 and right after they left, we found out that Angela was dead. So when I get to the  
22 church, Alicia tells me that Henry's dead. And it got scary.
- 23 R: Right. Is that about the time that you went out and met Jeffrey? Or you had met  
24 him before?

1 O7: I met Jeffrey after I found out that Cindy's boy and Angela Sizemore were dead.  
2 And, so then I stayed at the hospital, I mean at the church, and kept waiting for  
3 somebody to tell me something, and finally I went home with my son's mother-in-  
4 law. My son got here about 2:00 o'clock that morning. Well, he got here earlier  
5 but I found out later he had gone to all of the hospitals looking for Isaac and Daniel.  
6 So, that was Wednesday – Thursday, Friday and Saturday I spent at the church.

7 R: Can I ask you back on Jeffrey – again, in virtually every poll that's ever been done  
8 of the American public, it's times like that where someone is in a world of hurt, and  
9 you don't have the information – you don't even have the information – and  
10 someone comes up to you – that's, those are some of the cases that make the  
11 American public mad as hell. You don't sound like – I mean, you became friends  
12 with Jeffrey. What was it like, in talking with him – *why* did you talk to him? If  
13 you can . . .

14 O7: I don't know. I really don't. Because like I said, I wasn't used to talking to the  
15 news media. Maybe I just needed somebody to talk to. And he asked me if I would  
16 talk to him. And like I said, I hesitated for a few minutes and then I said yeah. He  
17 told me where he was from. My ex-husband is from Philadelphia, so the boys had a  
18 lot of relatives in Philadelphia. I have relatives in Philadelphia. So I guess, and I  
19 used to live in Philadelphia. So I guess I just felt that closeness to him.

20 R: Was it the reporter also? I mean, do you think if another reporter had come up and  
21 just hadn't been – it sounds like he must have been very sincere . . .

22 O7: He was.

23 R: . . . and you felt like he was being straightforward?

24 O7: Yes.

- 1 R: So it was comfortable and you made the decision . . .
- 2 O7: I felt very comfortable talking to him.
- 3 R: If he had been, if you hadn't had a good feeling about him – do you think at that
- 4 time you would have been able to say, I don't want to talk, and that would have
- 5 been respected?
- 6 O7: I think so. The news media, to me, were very respectful. I only got upset with one
- 7 news agency, and that was the *National Enquirer*. And that was at the church when
- 8 they offered to pay me for a story.
- 9 R: And that made you feel . . .
- 10 O7: I was very, I got very angry and I told him that Isaac and Daniel weren't for sale.
- 11 The news media at the church had a certain area they had to stay in. It was just like
- 12 at the trials. They could not come up and approach us. We talked to them on our
- 13 own. We went to them. But they could not come to us. That first day we went
- 14 over there they could, but after then, like I said, they had a certain area. If it was
- 15 raining, the church had a theater, and they had to stay in there. They could not
- 16 bother us at all. And I talked to the news media a lot.
- 17 R: Okay. How many days was it, or how long was it before you knew about Isaac and
- 18 Daniel?
- 19 O7: I found about them that Saturday evening.
- 20 R: So it was about four days?
- 21 O7: Um-hmmm.
- 22 R: A long four days.
- 23 O7: Um-hmmm.
- 24 R: And did you find out at the same time, or was . . .

- 1 O7: Same time. They came downstairs and told us that the medical examiner wanted us  
2 upstairs, and I knew then. I remember I kept saying, "I am not going. You're  
3 gonna try to tell me they are dead. They're not dead. I know they're not dead!"  
4 Because I just couldn't believe that they were dead. Those four days I kept saying  
5 to the news media, "I believe in miracles." I had prayed so hard that I knew God  
6 had answered my prayers. But my prayers weren't answered. And for a long time I  
7 had a problem with God. I didn't trust Him, I wouldn't ask Him for anything, and I  
8 fussed at Him constantly, because He had let me down. 'Cause I was asking for the  
9 most important thing in my life, just let those two little boys be alive. If they're  
10 injured, fine, I will take care of them. But just let them be alive. See, what you  
11 have to realize, those two little boys were my life. I had no other life other than  
12 those two little boys. I went to work. I worked for the County five days a week, I  
13 had another job I worked Saturdays and Sundays, just for those two little boys. Just  
14 to see them smile and knowing that they were taken care of the best I could.
- 15 R: When you went to the church the first time, and at that time it was still very  
16 confusing, and so the media was talking to families as the families tried to go to the  
17 church and get the information.
- 18 O7: I don't remember seeing any media when I went in the church. I know there was a  
19 local, I think it was Channel 4, was inside the church, and I remember Robin  
20 Marsh, and I think she's with Channel 9 now, and I remember talking to her,  
21 because she was trying to help us. She wanted to know what they were wearing,  
22 and, you know, things like that, so we could try to find out *if* they were alive and *if*  
23 they were at a hospital. Because, you know, so many people – at that time we

1        didn't know how many people were dead, how many people were injured and, and  
2        I, I know those hospitals were . . .

3    R:    Just crazy.

4    O7: Uh-huh. So, she was the only one I talked to. She's the only one I remember  
5        seeing.

6    R:    And in your heart of hearts, you feel – it sounds like again, just the way you were  
7        talking, at that time Robin was trying to help.

8    O7: She was helping us!

9    R:    Because she was, that was something that the media could do, maybe they had  
10       video and they had communication. Maybe you all needed all the help you could  
11       get.

12   O7: She wasn't asking us anything personal, just – you know, she *was* trying to help us!

13   R:    What about, um, at that point, I guess at some point there was a list that you all had  
14       to let the authorities know, the authorities wanted people to let them know who was  
15       in the building, because the records from inside the building were probably not  
16       available.

17   O7: I don't know where they got the list from, but, um, I never talked to the authorities.  
18       They wanted to go in my building, in my apartment and get the boys' fingerprints,  
19       but I told them they couldn't go in my apartment without me. And so they went to  
20       a friend of mine's house, because they usually took care of the boys on weekends  
21       while I worked, and they got their fingerprints from there.

22   R:    They just took it off of toys or things?

23   O7: Yeah, toys. I think there's a window where I think Daniel had a crib right up by the  
24       window. That was Isaac and Daniel's second home. If I was sick, they would pick

- 1        'em up from the day care center and take 'em and keep 'em for me. And I think  
2        Daniel's crib was right there by the window and he, in the mornings, he looked out  
3        the window at the birds. He liked birds, and he talked to the birds. And the  
4        fingerprints are on that window, still. They won't wash the window.
- 5    R:    That's a precious window.
- 6    O7:   Yeah. [chuckles] And so that's where they went and got the boys' fingerprints.  
7        And see, that Thursday morning, I had Jeff – Jeff is my second son – I had him take  
8        me home so I could take a shower and change clothes. I didn't have a home! I  
9        wore the same clothes from Wednesday morning to Friday afternoon.
- 10   R:    That's because you were living in the Regency and that was so heavily damaged,  
11        too.
- 12   O7:   Yeah. Finally, Friday afternoon I went to the Red Cross, said, "You've got to help  
13        me," I said, "I've got to get these clothes off!" I mean, take a shower, you know, I  
14        was taking a shower and putting the same dirty clothes back on! And those clothes  
15        had gotten wet, they had dried, and it was awful!
- 16   R:    Did you – 'cause you weren't at a home, you didn't have a home . . . .
- 17   O7:   I didn't have a home.
- 18   R:    . . . so the media weren't tracking you down and finding you at home.
- 19   O7:   No.
- 20   R:    So you weren't intruded on in that sense.
- 21   O7:   No. I was never intruded on by the media.
- 22   R:    Whenever you dealt with them it was either at the hospital where they asked?
- 23   O7:   They *always* asked.
- 24   R:    What made you talk to the media as you were waiting for more information?

1 O7: I don't know. I guess I just wanted people to know about Isaac and Daniel, and  
2 what had happened here.

3 R: Did you watch any of the coverage?

4 O7: I did. They had TVs in the room at the church where we waited.

5 R: How did they cover it? I mean, what was it like watching *your* story being told, and  
6 how did they do it? Did they, what did they do well and what didn't they do well?

7 O7: The media, well, since I was, since it was live, there's not too much wrong they  
8 could have done! [laughing] The newspaper can sort of mess up interviews, but  
9 since this was live, um, and since it was such a tragedy -- the news media were  
10 crying more than we were. I talked to news media from all over the world. Egypt,  
11 Israel, Germany, everywhere. Russia, Japan, China, and they just couldn't believe  
12 something like that would happen in this country. And they were very polite to me.  
13 I don't know what other people would say about the news media, I can only say  
14 what -- how they treated me. I was a grandmother and I had lost my little  
15 grandsons. And, uh, Americans have a lot of respect for grandmothers. Most  
16 people have fond memories of grandmothers and, uh, the one thing I did worry  
17 about, though, I don't know it was that Thursday morning, no. The kids' dad was  
18 in Atlanta when the bomb exploded, so it must have been that Friday morning. It  
19 was some time. I was watching TV and I saw their dad on -- he was on national TV  
20 and I kept thinking, "Oh, my God. My mother." My mother was sick, and, so it  
21 must have been that Thursday evening. I don't know when it was, because I had  
22 already talked to the media. Maybe I didn't talk to the media that Thursday, but  
23 this was Friday morning when I saw my son on TV, and, um, I went to the Red



1 Cross and [sigh, interruption, someone comes to the door]. This is a video, done by  
2 a reporter, a Canadian reporter a year after the bombing.

3 R: "The Fifth Estate," that's about the media, right? Is "The Fifth Estate"? What does  
4 that refer to?

5 O7: The Fifth Estate is a Canadian TV station, and they were here, I guess '96, and did  
6 a story on the bombing. There were here, they were in Elohim City, Tulsa and  
7 Kansas. I guess that's it.

8 R: Do any of these stand out in any way? I mean did you feel like the questions – all  
9 these different reporters, they were all – you know, when you said on the phone, "I  
10 have things to tell you," I was expecting that you had some horror stories with the  
11 media and I haven't heard any yet.

12 O7: I never had any. Not with the media.

13 R: Any of the reporters stand out? Any of the questions? Other than the *Enquirer*  
14 wanting to try and buy your story.

15 O7: No, they, you know, they would ask me, "Why were the boys with you?" and I'd  
16 say, "That's personal, I won't go into that," and they left it alone.

17 R: Then you saw your son being interviewed back in Atlanta.

18 O7: No, he had gotten here.

19 R: He'd gotten here, okay.

20 O7: Um-hmmm. And he was being interviewed so, that's when I went to the Red Cross  
21 and told them they needed to get in touch with the Red Cross in Alexandria and  
22 have them to send somebody out, 'cause I needed to tell my mom what had  
23 happened. So that's what they did and I called my mom and told her.

24 R: How'd you know to go to the Red Cross?

- 1 O7: Because we're military! [laughter] We were military! We always, all military  
2 people go to the Red Cross! [laughing]
- 3 R: I was wondering if that was some more information that got circulated among the  
4 family members or if you might have gotten that from – okay. The Red Cross came  
5 through for you? You feel like they took good care of you?
- 6 O7: Yeah. They, uh, called the Red Cross in Alexandria and had 'em send a lady out to  
7 stay with my mom, and then they let me call my mother and I told her. See, my  
8 mom never saw the boys. And I was planning on taking the boys to Virginia that  
9 summer so my mom could see them. She'd talked to them on the phone about  
10 twice a week, either we'd call her or she'd call them. They called my mom  
11 GeeGee, for great-grannie, you know? And they didn't know my mom was in a  
12 wheelchair, because she would always say, "When you come to see me, we're  
13 going fishing." My mom used to *love* to fish. So Isaac, he couldn't wait to go see  
14 GeeGee so he could go fishing. I never told him that GeeGee was in a wheelchair.
- 15 R: I'm sure she found places to fish.
- 16 O7: Yeah. Because my mom lived in a retirement home that was right on the Potomac  
17 River, it was beautiful. So they wouldn't have had too far to go. She could have  
18 gone in a wheelchair, but she never got to see 'em.
- 19 R: Did you worry about her and what her experience was gonna be like, seeing again,  
20 your story played out on her television? Did you ever talk to her about what that  
21 was like?
- 22 O7: My mom died 4 ½ months after the bombing. Um, my mom knows me. I'm so  
23 much like her. [chuckling]
- 24 R: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

1 O7: I think it's good right now. [laughing] There's a joke in the family that I'm my  
2 mom reincarnated. [laughter]

3 R: I take it your mom had a lot of strength then.

4 O7: She did. My mom was a very strong lady. My mom was a very smart lady. My  
5 mom only had an eighth-grade education, and my sisters and I used to sit up and we  
6 were amazed! You know, this lady had just finished high school.

7 R: She had the piece of paper. It sounds like she had the smarts.

8 O7: That's right, that's right. And, uh, I wanted my mom to know what was going on  
9 back here. I wanted my family – see, all my family's back East, and I wanted my  
10 family to know what was going on back here.

11 R: Did you kind of use the media in that sense when you talked to them, maybe to be  
12 able to send information, because you didn't have a home, and it was very difficult  
13 for you to keep in communication.

14 O7: Yeah, yeah. I talked to my therapist. I started getting therapy in May of '95, 'cause  
15 I was having a lot of problems and I talked to my therapist about the news media,  
16 and she said, "It's okay, as long as you use them. Don't ever let them use you."  
17 And I never let them use me.

18 R: That's a little late. I mean you had already gone through the crisis.

19 O7: Yeah, but the media didn't use me before. There was a story to be told, and what  
20 better way to get that story out than the news media. Especially after I saw  
21 Timothy McVeigh, what, three days later? Then his, his . . . His story started  
22 coming, unfolding. This man is a racist. He's a murderer. I mean, a *mass*  
23 murderer. And the American people needed to know that. The American people  
24 needed to *know* what happened in Oklahoma City that day.

1 R: What about when you got the news about your grandsons on Saturday I guess, and  
2 then you had to make funeral arrangements. A lot of criticism, a lot of discussion  
3 again. People's opinions of the media, all around our country, we don't know –  
4 death is a very sad or taboo – we don't want to talk to people. Did you have any  
5 problems or any control over whether the media covered the funeral or memorial  
6 service, if there was one?

7 O7: There were only two, uh, let me see – Channel 4 and Channel 9, I think – called me  
8 and asked me if they could cover the funeral. They were the only two that were  
9 inside that church.

10 R: And they had permission?

11 O7: They had permission.

12 R: And again, do you have any idea what was going through your mind at that time?

13 O7: My boys were laying up there in that casket, so they said. I never saw them after  
14 they died. The last time I saw those two little boys were when I dropped them off.  
15 I never got to see them again.

16 R: And so, having the media there was again telling their story, letting . . .

17 O7: Telling their story. Telling their story. Like I said, I wanted the whole world to  
18 know who Isaac and Daniel were. They were *very* special little boys. And that was  
19 the only way to introduce this country, this world, to those two little boys.

20 R: What happened following the coverage? Your family was keeping in touch – did  
21 other people reach out to you or hear, or learn about the boys? Did you connect up  
22 with other people through the media coverage?

1 O7: I heard from people from all over this country, New Zealand, Canada, England and  
2 Germany. I've gotten letters. I've gotten phone calls. I've gotten angels from all  
3 over the country.

4 R: You collect angels? We were just discussing that . . .

5 O7: I do now. I didn't then. And I'm still getting angels. This past Christmas I got six  
6 angels. Those were painted in Philadelphia. Some lady here painted that one. I've  
7 never seen her.

8 R: She just gave it to you?

9 O7: She sent it to my house by somebody else. That statue is a replica of a statue at the  
10 entrance to a park in McAllister, Oklahoma, where they planted trees in memory of  
11 the children. When you called me I was talking to a lady here in Oklahoma City  
12 that I have never met that sent that. I either get flowers, in fact she mentioned  
13 something today about my birthday being next Sunday, and she always sends me  
14 flowers or something on my birthday.

15 R: And this helps.

16 O7: It helps. People haven't forgotten Isaac and Daniel. It's not me. It's Isaac and  
17 Daniel.

18 R: Does it feel – I mean, your very private pain, everyone has seen.

19 O7: They have seen my pain, but they haven't seen my tears. I don't cry in public.

20 R: Um-hmmm. And again, it sounds like if you were using the media, you were in  
21 control That was part of it, I guess, that you would talk about your boys but you . . .

22 O7: I went home and cried.

23 R: And none of the reporters really looked for you to cry or . . .

- 1 O7: But I've seen them cry, *lots* of times. [interruption from phone call, about a  
2 minute]. Excuse me.
- 3 R: I can absolutely excuse you. In fact, if there's something you need to go run do, I  
4 can come back later or I can wait for you, or I can go do something.
- 5 O7: [Making a phone call] I have to tell you about Matthew. I need to go and pick  
6 Matthew up. He gets out at four. He's a little six-year old boy that has adopted me,  
7 really. He stays with me. [turning tape over]
- 8 R: It sounds like the therapist that you see, he or she may think that he's helping, but it  
9 sounds like he's the therapy, that Matthew is your therapy.
- 10 O7: Matthew is. He really is.
- 11 R: Well, I'll try and get this going, because I know you've got a life.
- 12 O7: My life?
- 13 R: Totally different. What about, again, at the funeral service, the media asked and  
14 you allowed them to come in. Did you see the coverage?
- 15 O7: I have a video of the funeral. It's back there somewhere.
- 16 R: Okay. Is that helpful or hurtful? Do you think they did a good job?
- 17 O7: They did a very good job, only I shouldn't have watched it. I saw some of the  
18 coverage on TV, you know, bits and pieces. The news media said there were over  
19 1400 people at the boys' funeral – that's a lot of people. Reverend Jesse Jackson  
20 spoke at their funeral. And, um, now, when we went to the – there was news media  
21 everywhere outside of the church, but not inside. Um, and at the cemetery.
- 22 R: Did you feel that was intrusive, or was that . . .
- 23 O7: I don't remember seeing the news media. The only person I remember seeing at the  
24 cemetery that was connected to the news media was Jeffrey Fleishman. But my

1        boys told me the fence, there's a fence that separates the cemetery from some  
2        houses on the other side. My boys told me the fence was covered with news media,  
3        but . . .

4    R:    You didn't even notice.

5    O7:   No. And still that would have been okay, because that was a story that had needed  
6        to be told. The American people *needed to know* about these crazy people in this  
7        country and what they did.

8    R:    You mentioned outside that you went to both of the trials, the McVeigh trial and the  
9        Nichols trial. Again, did the media seek you out there? Did you go to the media?

10   O7:   The media, like I said, were in this, they were fenced off and you could only talk to  
11        them inside that fence, yes.

12   R:    So this is in Denver, and you're talking about the Federal Courthouse in downtown  
13        Denver.

14   O7:   Yes.

15   R:    So you could come and go from where you were staying.

16   O7:   Um-hmm. In fact, I was living in Aurora during Timothy McVeigh's trial, and my  
17        cab fare back and forth was like \$30 a day until CBS found out, and they hired a car  
18        to pick me up and take me back and forth.

19   R:    Why'd they do that?

20   O7:   I don't know.

21   R:    That surprises me. Did you talk to CBS or do anything in particular or special for  
22        them?

23   O7:   I talked to CBS, I talked to NBC, I talked to ABC. I talked to CNN probably more  
24        than I did anybody. I've been interviewed by Geraldo several times. I've been on

1       Geraldo's show in New York. I've been on *Good Morning, America* I don't know  
2       how many times, once was in New York. Um, on Court TV, when Johnnie  
3       Cochran was on Court TV I did some shows with him, and, uh, *Larry King Live*.  
4       Like I said, there've been Japanese news media came to my house and interviewed  
5       me. I did Fox lots of times. Any time I had, I was in Denver and I had an interview  
6       with *Good Morning, America* or *Today Show*, they sent a limo out to pick me up  
7       and put me up in a hotel.

8   R:   So they took good care of you.

9   O7:  They took *very* good care of me. And I have nothing bad to say about the news  
10       media.

11  R:   You had no media experience prior to April of '95, and now it sounds like you've  
12       had literally hundreds of interviews.

13  O7:  I have.

14  R:   If someone else were to go through this experience, and unfortunately people will,  
15       any lessons that you've learned from this or anything that you would share with  
16       people?

17  O7:  As far as the news media?

18  R:   Yeah. Things that you might have done differently or things that you didn't know  
19       then but that you've learned since then from all of this?

20  O7:  Not from the news media. In fact, when I got home today there was, I looked on  
21       Caller ID and the *Daily Oklahoman* had called. I don't know what they wanted,  
22       and it scared me, because I don't know – they don't usually call unless something  
23       new comes up. Like when Timothy McVeigh's mom . . .

24  R:   Did that interview. "Get over it," was that what she said?



- 1 O7: She said, "Get over it."
- 2 R: That must have been incredibly painful.
- 3 O7: I was so angry when I watched the whole interview, and then it dawned on me, this  
4 lady is a nut. I think she put the S in stupid. And, uh, then – because I remember  
5 her on the witness stand in the sentencing phase of Timothy's trial, where she was  
6 crying and apologizing to us and begging for her son's life. Now, somewhere, she  
7 has either made a great change or she wasn't being sincere. You know, she said,  
8 um, when she was asked about, um, Tim's execution, "I will cross that bridge when  
9 I come to it." See, I would have been walking across, would have started walking  
10 across that bridge the day my son was arrested. And I'd still be on that bridge until  
11 my son was executed. I don't know if I would ever get across that bridge or not.  
12 Just the thought that my son did something *so bad* that he's gonna be executed for  
13 it.
- 14 R: So when you saw her, there's nothing to relate to because either she's dumb as dirt  
15 or hard as stone.
- 16 O7: I think she's dumb as dirt.
- 17 R: Did you think that came across in the interview?
- 18 O7: Yes!
- 19 R: Did it – it would be hurtful to see the mother of the guy who ruined your life . . . .
- 20 O7: I'll show you something. [pause; movement in room]
- 21 R: I've kinda, a lot of times I'm gonna be asking, I've asked the same things . . .
- 22 O7: That's Terry Nichols' mom. [Showing researcher a courtroom artist's depiction of  
23 two women.]
- 24 R: Is that next to you?

- 1 O7: Yeah. [interruption for phone] Here's an article I just got off the Internet last  
2 week.
- 3 R: So, oh okay. What's the story of that? Does this tell the story of why . . . [O7 and  
4 Mrs. Nichols being seated next to one another at the trial.]
- 5 O7: Yeah. [long pause]
- 6 R: It looks like Mrs. Nichols may have been looking over you,
- 7 O7: It looks like she's rolling her eyes.
- 8 R: She's glaring at you, even.
- 9 O7: It does look that way, but she was . . .
- 10 R: Well, what do you make of this story? I mean, do you think that this is, um, is this  
11 a good example of the media . . .
- 12 O7: Yeah. They printed it exactly, exactly like it was.
- 13 R: So they didn't sensationalize it.
- 14 O7: No.
- 15 R: They didn't make you out to be best friends when you weren't.
- 16 O7: No.
- 17 R: And they didn't make it out to be any warmer than it was cordial.
- 18 O7: No.
- 19 R: That's . . . pretty...
- 20 O7: In fact, Joyce held a seat, Joyce would hold a seat for me in the mornings, because  
21 she got in the courtroom before I did. And she would hold me a seat.
- 22 R: Boy, that says something, in that you all were able to be different sides of the table  
23 in a sense, but the issue wasn't about you two personally. It was about . . .
- 24 O7: Her son.

- 1 R: Her son. Well, in the trial, if I remember right, after the verdict came back with  
2 McVeigh, a lot of family members, very angry. And weren't you, did you speak to  
3 the media about the verdict?
- 4 O7: McVeigh or Nichols?
- 5 R: I think McVeigh.
- 6 O7: McVeigh got death.
- 7 R: Okay, so it was Nichols.
- 8 O7: Nichols, yeah. Nichols should have got death.
- 9 R: You went to the media, what was that, you went to the media to tell them that you  
10 were angry initially at the placement of the Nichols family in the midst of . . .
- 11 O7: Yeah, yeah. We were sitting in the back of the courtroom.
- 12 R: And they were right up front.
- 13 O7: They were up front. I went to the media and another family member was the one  
14 that complained and they moved them to the back of the courtroom. But,  
15 [chuckling] that same family member came in the courtroom, came in one morning  
16 and he said, uh, "You made the newspaper again." And I said, "What did I do this  
17 time?" He said, "You had Joyce and her daughter moved to the back of the  
18 courtroom," and I started laughing. Because it was *him* that did! [laughter]
- 19 R: The newspaper wasn't attributing it you ?
- 20 O7: It was the newspaper! [laughter]
- 21 R: So they got a few things wrong.
- 22 O7: Yeah. But that was okay. 'Cause I was angry because they were at the front of the  
23 courtroom, too. I just didn't know what to do about it. [laughing]

- 1 R: I've got a list of questions: these are kind of the things that I cover in an interview,  
2 and I try and just talk, and just go where the interview goes. I'm just gonna read  
3 these questions and see if we've covered it, and see if they spark anything else you  
4 want to say, or can remember. Can you describe how this event unfolded for you?  
5 We covered that, and you didn't, it doesn't sound like you really watched that much  
6 of the coverage. It sounds like you have a lot of it on videotapes in the cabinet.  
7 But, um, you . . .
- 8 O7: It's too *painful* to watch it.
- 9 R: So that was a conscious decision. It wasn't just – meanwhile I guess part of it, too,  
10 again, your apartment at the Regency was gone.
- 11 O7: Yeah.
- 12 R: Or unavailable. So it's not like you had a place that you could sit down and there's  
13 a TV.
- 14 O7: No, not until after. I stayed with my son's in-laws for a month, and then I went to a  
15 motel room. And I was there for five months, in that motel room. By that time  
16 they had gone back to the OJ Simpson trial, and I didn't watch the OJ Simpson  
17 trial. I wasn't interested in the OJ Simpson trial. So.
- 18 R: And you said that the broadcast media tended to get things right, because a lot of  
19 their coverage was live, so you were either looking at it or hearing it yourself.
- 20 O7: That's right.
- 21 R: Or, you would cut them a little slack because they were as confused and trying to  
22 get information like everyone else.
- 23 O7: They were, because the few tapes I have watched – you know, first it was nobody  
24 knew what had happened. Then there were more people died than there were

1       supposed to have been. Then the John Doe came up and they were, you know – all  
2       of this is on those tapes. There's a lady that lives in Chickasha, Oklahoma, I think,  
3       and she, my phone number has always been listed. And she called me to get my  
4       address, and she mailed me sixteen tapes from the day of the bombing on up to the  
5       implosion.

6   R:   Why did she do that? She just thought it was something that would be important to  
7       your family?

8   O7:  She asked me if I wanted them. Yes, I think it *will be* important. One of these days  
9       all of that is gonna be history.

10  R:   You knew it was history then, didn't you?

11  O7:  Yeah.

12  R:   From the get-go.

13  O7:  Yeah.

14  R:   What about – you started to talk a little bit at the beginning about information and  
15       who knew what. What's the media, how is that, um, those two things kind of been  
16       related?

17  O7:  The local media has very little to say about prior warning. The local media, I don't  
18       know what's wrong with them, because after Timothy McVeigh's trial (I stayed in  
19       Aurora for a while) and I read more – I read things in the *Rocky Mountain News*  
20       and the *Denver Post* than the people here read. Same thing with Terry Nichols'  
21       trial. At the, during the, when the defense was, uh, giving their case, and this was  
22       Terry Nichols' defense, Michael Tigar put a man on the witness stand that, um, um,  
23       testified to seeing a certain man at Garrett's Lake the day the bomb was being  
24       made. And Michael Tigar showed a picture of this man and the man identified the

1 picture, "Yeah, he was at Garry, Garrett Lake that day." The news media went  
2 crazy. They wanted to know *who* this person was. So did I! He looked a lot like  
3 Robert Nichols, Terry's dad. And I even asked Terry's sister, Susie, I said, "Was  
4 that your dad?" And she said, "I don't think so, but it looks like him, doesn't it?"  
5 and I said, "Yes." Well, uh, Kevin Flynn and another reporter with the *Rocky*  
6 *Mountain News* did an investigation on this man. Found out this man was in  
7 Kansas in jail the day the bomb was made.

8 R: So, big problem with the testimony.

9 O7: Yeah, but nobody ever did anything about it. In fact, in March of '98 they had a  
10 hearing in Denver for Terry Nichols and I was still staying in Denver so I went to  
11 court. And I asked one of the prosecuting attorneys, I said, "What are you gonna do  
12 about this? The man *lied* on the witness stand!" Nothing has ever been done about  
13 that man lying on the witness stand.

14 R: So the media, in this case, did some research, some homework . . .

15 O7: Yeah, out-of-state media. And if you really want to find out what's going on, you  
16 gotta check. I watch CNN or I'll, uh, go downtown and buy the Denver paper or  
17 some other paper, because you're not gonna find too much in the paper in  
18 Oklahoma and the news media in Oklahoma is not gonna say too much.

19 R: Why is that, do you think?

20 O7: I don't know.

21 R: Possibly, it could be maybe they think that people do need to move on and maybe  
22 by not printing the . . .

23 O7: People need to *know* what's going on! Just like, back in '97, I don't know if you  
24 ever heard of Carol Howe? She was a government informant? She lives in Tulsa,

1 and she testified that she *had* reported to the ATF that there were some people at  
2 Elohim City were threatening to blow up some federal buildings? Well, last week I  
3 got a copy of Carol Howe's transcript and of the ATF agent that she reported to.  
4 She did warn them. The ATF agent verified that she warned them. She did tell her  
5 handler that they were, she was coming to Oklahoma City with some of those  
6 people from Elohim City. She and her agent, that agent did bring her to Oklahoma  
7 City so she could show them the places they visited here.

8 R: Now, this has been reported, or how did you learn of this?

9 O7: I read the transcript from the trial. From Carol Howe's trial.

10 R: Has that been reported? I mean, it doesn't sound like Oklahoma City media --

11 O7: Didn't do very much with it. What I learned about that trial, other than reading the  
12 transcript, I got it out of the Tulsa paper. I had a friend here that subscribed to the  
13 Tulsa paper and she would bring me the articles. I had a friend in Denver before  
14 the trials and in between the trials that would send me articles from Denver.

15 R: Someone that I was interviewing for Columbine said to me that they were grateful  
16 for the media because the media would give them the truth, that they weren't  
17 perfect but that some people didn't think people could handle the truth and she  
18 wanted the truth.

19 O7: That's the way I feel. The truth -- how else are you gonna get the truth out without  
20 the news media? And, now I remember [tape interference]

21 R: I think a lot of people would be surprised to hear the vehemence, the way you say  
22 that, that if we didn't have the media we wouldn't know the truth.

23 O7: We wouldn't. And like I said, here lately, so much has come in forward about these  
24 groups. And the American people need to know about these people. I don't think

1 Oklahoma City was the end. I believe Oklahoma City was the beginning. I mean,  
2 we've had Columbine. We've had – what was that Jewish school in California?

3 R: Schoolyard shooting, yeah.

4 O7: I set up and watched that on TV and to see those policemen with those babies – you  
5 know they had that rope and those kids were holding on to the rope going across the  
6 street – I broke down and cried. They were *babies*.

7 R: Yeah. And someone was shooting at them.

8 O7: Yeah, and they were just like little soldiers. Brave children. But without the news  
9 media, we wouldn't have known about that. We wouldn't have known about  
10 Columbine.

11 R: How much, um, how credible is the media? You've lived the story, it's your story  
12 and it's been reported – how accurate, how *right* has the media gotten it?

13 O7: I've had one complaint. I mean, I *have* one complaint. When I was – and I had  
14 started to tell you this – when I was staying out at the motel, this reporter with the  
15 *Daily Oklahoman* called me and wanted to know if we were getting financial help,  
16 which we did get some. And, uh, I was complaining because FEMA had sent me a  
17 check for \$500, or maybe it was \$600, but it wasn't gonna replace all of my soft  
18 furniture. We had to – we that lived at the Regency had to replace all of our soft  
19 furniture because glass was imbedded in it. I had glass tables that were shattered.  
20 Uh, the stereo cabinet was shattered. My TV and VCR sat right by the patio door.  
21 It rained for days, and, uh, I didn't know if the VCR was working. So I asked  
22 FEMA, I asked, "What about my VCR?" And they said, "That's not a necessity." I  
23 said, "But I bought it." I just knew the TVs weren't gonna work. The boys' TV did  
24 work. We'd only had that for seven months, 'cause I'd gotten it for their birthdays.



- 1        My TV, the one that was sitting right by the door, is in my bedroom now, and it still  
2        works. And so this reporter called me and asked me, and I mentioned the VCR.  
3        Well, when that story was written, I was *so* mad . . . .
- 4    R:    ‘Cause they made it sound like it was all about a VCR.
- 5    O7:   All about a VCR. Poor Sarah Eliassen. Nobody will replace her VCR. It was  
6        *awful*.
- 7    R:    Did you call them or let them know?
- 8    O7:   Nope. He called me again for another story and I think I cursed him out. But I  
9        never talked to him again.
- 10   R:    And that’s the worst thing you can think? Of all those encounters with the media?  
11        All the hours of coverage?
- 12   O7:   Um-hmmm. Because they were always apologizing. “Ms. Eliassen, we’re sorry, but  
13        will you talk to us? We know you’re hurting.” I mean, they have had nothing but  
14        respect for me. Nothing but respect. I still have some to just call me and ask me  
15        how I am doing.
- 16   R:    That would surprise people, don’t you think?
- 17   O7:   Yeah. [chuckles]
- 18   R:    I’m surprised. I’m surprised that – I mean, I know that I’ve worked with media so I  
19        know that they’re human beings, too, but I think the competition sometimes drives  
20        people to do things that are over the line. And again, in your case, it was an  
21        extreme story. My other questions: Tell me about your experiences with the news  
22        media during this time. How were you approached? It sounds like, um,  
23        respectfully and . . .
- 24   O7:   Very respectfully.

1 R: How did the media find and contact you? Again, most of the time you went to  
2 them, when you had something that you wanted to say.

3 O7: Until I moved back in my apartment. Like I said, my phone number's listed.

4 R: And then you got . . .

5 O7: They would call me. I have a book where I set up, where I made appointments.

6 They would call me and *ask*. I never went to my door and there was news media  
7 standing there. I knew they were coming. Sometimes they would just come to use  
8 my balcony so they could take pictures of the bomb site. I lived on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor,  
9 on the south side of the building. When I walked out on my balcony, I could look  
10 down at the bomb site.

11 R: How long did you stay there? Not long, so then you went to the motel?

12 O7: No, this was – I moved from the motel and, on October 16<sup>th</sup> 1995, went back in my  
13 apartment. See, I lived at the Regency for almost 14 years.

14 R: Okay, so it was not a place that you immediately thought, I just need to get away  
15 from. How long did you stay there?

16 O7: After the bombing?

17 R: Yeah.

18 O7: Until the last of August of '97. It was a big mistake to move back there. Big  
19 mistake. I should have never moved back there.

20 R: Okay, it was just there, every day, and every thing.

21 O7: Every time I walked out on my balcony, I looked down at the bomb site. Every  
22 time I left my building I went – there was the bomb site. If I left in a car, I went  
23 right by the bomb site, because 5<sup>th</sup> Street is a one-way street, and we had to go up to  
24 the bomb site in order to leave.

1 R: Did the media ever overwhelm you? You had a listed number, they knew that you  
2 were willing to talk to them. Did it ever get to points where you just had too much,  
3 more than you could handle?

4 O7: If I didn't want to talk to them, I didn't. There were times I didn't.

5 R: Okay. How did you feel the news media representatives acted towards you?  
6 How'd you feel toward them? Who was in control of the process?

7 O7: I feel like I was in control. I always felt like I was in control.

8 R: And that's GeeGee coming out.

9 O7: Yeah! [laughing]

10 R: And you knew instinctively. I mean, this is just you, that you, you're assertive –  
11 did you see other family members that you felt like weren't being given the same  
12 consideration?

13 O7: You know, a lot of the family members have come up to me and thanked me for  
14 representing the family members. I didn't start out to do that. I was speaking for  
15 Sarah and Isaac and Daniel. The Governor came up to me April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1998, and  
16 hugged me and thanked me for representing the State of Oklahoma. I didn't know I  
17 was doing that. I have a card, I keep this card around. This lady sent me this  
18 Christmas card, I think it was Christmas of '97. No, Christmas of '96.

19 R: Sorry. And this is a complete stranger who writes to thank you for "showing us all  
20 what class is all about." Well, you know, someone else said to me, about media  
21 coverage, that she said, she just kind of put it the other way around. She and her  
22 family had dealt with the media extensively and she actually invited them to her  
23 wedding later, to attend, not to cover it. She made sure she emphasized that to  
24 them. But she said maybe, um, maybe it's not right for some people to work with

1       the media, she said, but is it really better to be alone? Is it really better that people  
2       don't tie ribbons around trees? Is it really better that people don't know who your  
3       loved one was? And she just went on like that for about 45 seconds, is it better if?  
4       It was very compelling. I guess there's some family members that couldn't talk to  
5       the media. You know, they couldn't put it in words, or they just weren't ready to  
6       tell the story, but you did that, for their loved ones as well, unintentionally.

7   O7: I had, I knew 20 people that died in that building that day.

8   R:   Oh my goodness. Mostly through the kids and Isaac and Daniel's friends . . .

9   O7: The kids. I knew all of the children that died in the daycare center. And I knew the  
10       teachers that died in the daycare center. There were three men that lived in the  
11       building where I lived that died in the building that day. I knew two of them well.  
12       So that came up to 20 people. That's a lot of people to lose at one time. And,  
13       somebody had to know about our pain. I still talk to the news media. When those  
14       kids shot up Columbine High School, the news media came. When the people,  
15       when this man went in the school in Scotland, the news media came. [interruption  
16       by child]

17   R:   This is kind of an odd question – I think I kind of touched on it, but as you look  
18       back on the event, were your expectations of your personal privacy met?

19   O7: I didn't want any privacy. I had too much privacy. When you're by yourself, you  
20       talk, you think. I didn't want to think. I still don't want to think.

21   R:   So you interacted with people because the media gave you that opportunity.

22   O7: They gave me the opportunity to talk about the boys. You see, after the funeral is  
23       over, people expect you to get on with your life.

24   R:   They do.

- 1 O7: And, uh, there is no life to get on with. There's nothing but pain. I want to tell you  
2 something. April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1996 was a Wednesday, and I got up out of the bed and it  
3 was like somebody had taken a bucket full of depression and just poured it over me.  
4 And I started thinking, Lord, I can't deal with this any more. And I poured all my  
5 pills out in my hand and for a second, it was like "take the pills, the pain will be  
6 gone." But then, there was something inside me that said, that asked the question,  
7 "Are you sure this is what you want to do to the rest of your family?" And I  
8 couldn't do that to the rest of my family. Because Isaac and Daniel's dad had told  
9 me after his dad died, said, "Mama, I guess when you leave I'll leave with you."  
10 And I said, "You can't do that."
- 11 R: So, you felt like you had told him something and now you needed to live up to what  
12 you told him.
- 13 O7: That's right.
- 14 R: You had a promise to keep.
- 15 O7: Yeah. My boys needed me. My boys definitely needed me. My boys still need  
16 me. My boys have nobody but me now. Their dad died. Their grandmother died,  
17 so they just have me. And then I have grandchildren.
- 18 R: And you've got Matthew.
- 19 O7: And now I have Matthew.
- 20 R: There were other victims of the bombing, though, just as at Columbine, the mother  
21 that committed suicide six months after – coverage of that? Do you feel like that is  
22 bad or is that just acknowledging what's happening? I'm asking you some really  
23 'out there' questions . . . .

1 O7: I think it's just acknowledging what happened and [pause] those two boys that  
2 committed the murder, I mean, to me, they killed her, too. She couldn't deal with  
3 the pain. That's the way it was with my ex-husband and my mom. My ex-husband  
4 said he had buried too many grandchildren. He just couldn't bury any more. He  
5 buried four. We've lost four grandchildren. And so, he gave up living. My mom  
6 said, told my sister, "I'm going to be with my babies." She referred to Isaac and  
7 Daniel as her babies. And she died. Well, I got angry with both of them, because  
8 they died at the wrong time.

9 R: Yeah, you needed them.

10 O7: I needed them, and they gave up. My ex-husband and I were friends. I always  
11 referred to my ex-husband as my dad, because to me he raised me. He was only  
12 five years older than I am, but, uh, he knew so much more than I did, he was a very  
13 intelligent man. And he came here after the bombing and, uh, they left me here to,  
14 to take care of his sons all by myself. And I can understand what that lady did. I  
15 wish she *hadn't* done it!

16 R: But you understand.

17 O7: I understand. There's a lot of days you don't want to get up out of the bed. There's  
18 a lot of days I wish I could just sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep, 'cause I don't  
19 remember dreams any more. Before the bombing, I remembered all of my dreams.  
20 Since the bombing, I don't remember dreams. My therapist said it's probably just  
21 as well.

22 R: Anything else about the media, telling your story, having it told?

23 O7: Yeah. Dan Rather is one of the sweetest men I've ever met. [laughter]

24 R: A pussycat, huh?

1 O7: Yeah!

2 R: What happened? How did you interact with him?

3 O7: I did some news coverage with him.

4 R: When he came out?

5 O7: To Denver. And Harry Smith. Anyway, uh, after Timothy McVeigh was  
6 convicted, CBS gave us a party and Dan was there, and he was interviewing – he  
7 had finished interviewing Stephen Jones, Timothy McVeigh's attorney, and he  
8 came downstairs where we were. And I walked up to him to shake his hand, and he  
9 said, "I don't want a handshake. I want a hug." And it was a good hug. I, um, I  
10 met Clinton, too. I've talked to him about the bombing, and Hillary.

11 R: Were these public meetings or private meetings?

12 O7: Public. This is '96 and Bill Clinton came back to Oklahoma City, and I needed to  
13 talk to him. And I had gotten in line to talk to him, and the line was so long until I  
14 got out of line and, um, the US Attorney came up to me and asked me had I talked  
15 to the President. And I said, "No, I got out of the line." And he said, "Well, I think  
16 you need to talk to him. I think you have something he needs to hear."

17 R: Um-hmmm. What'd you tell him?

18 O7: I made, um, I reminded him of the promise he made right after the bombing, and I  
19 told him, I said, uh, "Everybody involved in the bombing have not been arrested."  
20 And I know for a fact there's a John Doe Number 2. I know that for a fact. And I  
21 said, "Now, really, nobody arrested anybody." I said, "Well, Timothy McVeigh  
22 was caught."

23 R: He got himself arrested, is that what you ...

1 O7: [laughing] He did! For some reason that I don't know, I don't think Tim was dumb  
2 enough to have been riding from, driving from Oklahoma City to Kansas without a  
3 license tag on his car. Tim is not dumb! And I said Terry Nichols turned himself  
4 in. And I said, "Maybe there's nothing *you* can do, but I'm sure you know  
5 somebody that can do something about the rest of the people that were involved in  
6 the bombing." And when I finished talking, he went to shake my hand and said,  
7 "Mr. Clinton, we don't shake hands. We hug."

8 R: The Oklahoma Standard? Is that . . . ?

9 O7: That's the family members. And when we see each other, we always hug each  
10 other. And when, I can be walking down the street – I always run into somebody  
11 that recognizes me, and they'll come up – I have had people come up and ask me,  
12 "Ms. Eliassen, can I hug you?" And so he hugged me. And then I looked at Hillary  
13 and I said, "Mrs. Clinton, I'd like a hug from you, too," and she hugged me. I don't  
14 think she really wanted to! [whispered] [laughter]

15 R: Where is she from originally? Isn't she from Chicago?

16 O7: Somewhere like that, yeah. But I can imagine people in Arkansas, all except those  
17 crazy people, are very friendly, loving people. But, uh, some people from other  
18 places are cold, and I got the impression of her as being cold. [interruption by  
19 phone]

20 O7: . . . . Ice Lady.

21 R: Joan Lunden is the Ice Lady?

22 O7: That's what I call her. I did *Good Morning, America* in New York. I think if the  
23 lady had really put on a good smile her face would have broken. She's a very cold  
24 lady.



1 R: Some people I've heard complain about the news shows because when you're  
2 asked to be on them, they'll take care of you, you'll talk to producers, but what  
3 you're actually asked by the on-air talent may have nothing to do with what you  
4 may have talked about with producers.

5 O7: I didn't talk to . . . . Well, maybe I did talk to the producer. But I knew why I was  
6 being flown to New York. It was the day, they called me the same day it was  
7 announced that the trial was being moved to Denver. And I don't think I said what  
8 she wanted to hear me say. I'm a very vocal person. I say what I feel. If I hurt  
9 somebody's feelings, so be it. And, uh, she asked me – well, I was in New York,  
10 the Governor and Stephen Jones were being interviewed via satellite. And, uh, she  
11 asked me how did I feel about the trial being moved to Denver. And I, I think she  
12 expected me to be very angry, which I was. But I try, when I get on, when I'm in  
13 front of the camera, I try not to say anything that's gonna embarrass the rest of the  
14 family members. And I said, "Well, I wish the trial had stayed in Oklahoma City,  
15 but I know, you now, that if it had, there was a possibility that there would have  
16 been a mistrial." And she gave this little grin that wasn't really a grin, and Stephen  
17 Jones, she talked to Stephen Jones and he said, "Ms. Eliassen is right." [interruption  
18 from child]

19 R: Did you feel like Joan Lunden expected you to be an unsavvy family member that  
20 was just so overcome by the thing that you would give some kind of emotional  
21 outburst, and you wouldn't be talking about technicalities of the law?

22 O7: Yes. No, that's what I think. But I've always tried to choose my words very  
23 carefully when I'm talking to the news media. There's been a couple of times when  
24 I didn't, like with Terry Nichols mom. I think I was talking to Penny, I was in

1       Denver and I was talking to Penny Owens from the *Daily Oklahoman* and I said, “I  
2       can’t imagine a woman giving birth to the two of them.” I was talking about Terry  
3       and James. But I can’t.

4   R:   Yeah. Well now, was that a – you had conversations with people like Penny who  
5       covered the story from the get-go off the record, and Jeffrey, who . . .

6   O7: I was looking for, this – commentary? Documentary? I don’t know what you’d  
7       call it – that Jeffrey did, and it’s beautiful, but I can’t find it. And it was done after  
8       the funeral. My son in Delaware made a copy of it and sent it to me. Got it out of  
9       the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. But, um, [pause] I can’t remember anybody with the  
10      news media disrespecting me. I just can’t. In fact, I had written a letter to Ann  
11      Landers back in ninety- . . . I guess it was still in ’95, but I never could get her  
12      phone, her mailing address, thanking the news media.

13   R:   Were there any of the family members that come to mind that may have had a  
14      negative experience or that you heard horror stories?

15   O7: No.

16   R:   That’s amazing.

17   O7: There were a lot of family members that did not talk to the news media. In fact,  
18      when we were going back and forth to Denver to the hearings, I would drag ‘em up  
19      to the podium with me. “It’s time for you to say something ‘cause I’ve done all the  
20      talking.” And there were times, like that article said, when I was angry. Like going  
21      in the courtroom – I have a watch that was made for me from somebody in Tulsa. I  
22      don’t know what I did with it, but it’s got two little black angels on it. And I had to  
23      take that off, and, um, what else was it.

24   R:   You had to take it off.

- 1 O7: Yeah. We couldn't wear anything in the courtroom with religious symbols. And  
2 every time I'd wear something – I had an angel, I think it was – I had to take that  
3 off. So the next day, I'd said, "Well, I'll put on the St. Christopher." Well, they  
4 made me take that off, too. And I was mad. I went out the courtroom, went  
5 straight in the bullpen and told the whole world.
- 6 R: And then could you wear your watch and your St. Christopher?
- 7 O7: I started wearing it anyway. We were, first we were told that we couldn't, we were  
8 in Denver to the hearing and we were told that we could *not* attend the trial, uh,  
9 testify at the trial . . .
- 10 R: And the sentencing.
- 11 O7: And, and, uh, yeah, at the sentencing, and attend any more hearings or the trial. We  
12 went to the news media.
- 13 R: Um-hmm. So, the news media, they were almost like a referee. If you didn't feel  
14 like you were getting a fair shake . . .
- 15 O7: We went to the news media.
- 16 R: And if you had not gone to the news media, you wouldn't have been given the time  
17 of day.
- 18 O7: No. Then Judge Matsch, – and I have no love for Judge Matsch, believe me. He  
19 gave us a hard time. Then Judge Matsch said that we couldn't have closed circuit  
20 TV. Well, some of the family members went to Washington that time. The news  
21 media had it, and in fact, after President Clinton said we could, the news media  
22 reported "Family Members Move Washington." So, to me, the things we got  
23 accomplished that the news media reported will help . . .
- 24 R: Help the next people to go through it.

1 O7: That's right. They wouldn't know about it if it wasn't for the news media. If you  
2 think about it, Martin Luther King's family did very little until they saw us fighting.  
3 We fought for everything, every right we got, believe me. We had to fight for it.  
4 And, uh, after they saw us fighting so, then they came forward and started  
5 demanding another investigation. And that's what I'm doing. I'm trying to get a  
6 congressional investigation. I want to know why the, um, the federal agents . . .

7 R: Or everybody.

8 O7: . . . didn't do anything about that building, knowing April 19<sup>th</sup> was a bad day.  
9 Knowing that Richard Snell was scheduled to be executed April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1995.  
10 Knowing that it was the anniversary of what happened at Waco, and God only  
11 knows what happened at Waco. Knowing these things, and didn't do *anything*. We  
12 had one security guard that was patrolling three buildings, three government  
13 buildings. You very seldom saw security at the Murrah Building.

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